



complete control 8





In New Orleans we started going to a neighborhood bar and getting to know some of the girls that hung out there. When we were lucky the bartender would give us free drinks. My last night with JJ as a traveling partner was the night of my 22nd birthday. We stayed out at that bar all night, playing Johnny Cash and the Stones and getting wasted. I cried when I thought of him leaving, at the picture of us riding our bikes up Esplanade street. I think about the two dollar poboys that we consumed almost daily on the steps in front of Nowe Miasto, of changing a friend's oil in the Bywater, JJ getting up under the car and getting soaked with it, smelling like oil for days. It was December and we were out in our shirt sleeves that day, getting ready to climb into the bed of a truck and drive to Austin, Texas. The thing I was thinking about most that day is that you don't need money to be happy. I was thinking "Christ, I'm fucking lucky."

How could I write about the energy that passed between JJ and I and have it seem real. By choking him I feel like I'm peeling back his skin, learning who he is, what he is capable of. And when he humiliates me, when he gets the look in his eyes that says he means to hurt, I fill with tenderness and am not sure what to do with myself, with my suddenly hollow chest. After collaring and throwing me to the floor, after slapping me hard across the face, he looks down at me and says, "I'm going to miss you" and I start crying right away, not in a slow leak but in big sobs, chest heaving, head swelling. He falls on top of me and he's crying too. We don't know what the fuck we are to each other. ~~We~~ don't know at all.

The following is a departure from my usual zine format. Instead of short fiction the entire zine consists of one long non-fiction essay. It is a document to record the things that have happened in my life in roughly the past year. After this I probably won't continue to do TDS. I no longer live in Richmond and I'm currently nomadic. You can send mail to this address: PO Box 5502 Johnson City, TN 37602 and I'll still get it. This zine is two bucks if you can afford it, less than that if you can't.



"Baby this town rips the bones from your back, it's a death trap, it's a suicide trap" — Bruce Springsteen

Introduction: Although this one has been only nine or so months in the creative and developmental sense it has been years in the making. The people, places and events that unfold over the next thirty pages make up the whole of my existence over the past five years of my life. It is hard to imagine who or where I might be today if it wasn't for those chance encounters, those impossible occurrences and the tortured streets of the city that I dwell in. This one's for Shawn, Yvonne, Kim and Will without whom none of this would be possible. Keep on Pushing, Greg.

*Back Issues 3-7 can be obtained by writing to Tree of Knowledge Press at PO Box 251766 Little Rock, Arkansas 72225. Send a couple of bucks to be on the safe side.

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My last days in Richmond were some of the best ever. I stood out in the backyard of 325 South Cherry and looked over the remains of the garden, remembering the times I had spent picking my way through the ruined gardens of my father and grandfather. In October the stakes that had held up the tomatoes were weather stained and slanted, tendrils of beans brown and dry, melon and cucumber vines running dried up everywhere, the smashed bodies of pumpkins sinking into the earth. Carefully studying those disintegrating figures while growing up must have shaped a large portion of my personal aesthetic. On chilly evenings in the middle of nowhere there was nothing else to do, so I'd ruminate on death.

I walked out the back door and stood on the steps of the porch. The garden was less green than when I had left in August five weeks before. Most of the vegetables had been harvested. The thick stalks of sunflowers had been severed. The firepit Yvonne built when we moved in was covered in brush and the stones I had laid in the earth around it were almost covered by weather. I stood on the back steps for a long time, shaken by the thought of a summer gone by, by old stories of birth and death, by the memories of the late evening thunderstorms that captured the entire city during the months of June and July.

Looking at different sections of the garden I could also see parts of relationships with the people I was leaving. The tomato plants were wounded in the places where I had tied them too tightly, stalks falling against the neighbor's fence where the stakes were not driven deeply enough into the earth. The wild poke had been cut while I was gone; the rest of the greens were sparse. The eggplants were a deep glistening purple, hanging fat and perfect on their stalks.

In the past I had an uneasy relationship with the rituals I remember from my childhood. My parent's way of life, from living on your family's land to cutting and chopping wood, sewing, canning food, squeezing cane for molasses, cooking everyday butchering and curing hogs, pulling moss for extra money, to the work of planting, cultivating, and harvesting, to my grandfather's numerous building projects, taking apart cars and water pumps and septic systems seemed ignorant. I was embarrassed by my mother's red knuckles and worry lines, my father's rough hands and worn boots. I was embarrassed by how much they worked and for how little. The smell of my father's sweat and the image of my mother scraping snow from her windshield in the early morning hours haunted me. His smashed thumbs and stained white T-shirts, my mother's ruined wrists and cheap shoes were things that I wanted to outrun and could not.

By the time the summer of '97 rolled around the anti zoning battles had exploded into front page news and fierce oppositional battles in the city council chambers. On the 28th of July the city passed into law that it would enforce and track all feeding program code violators not located in the B-4 area. In the weeks leading up to the much delayed decision hundreds of folks of all persuasions filled City Hall to the rafters in highly spirited opposition. Among those saying that they would by no means abide by the laws was city councilman and minister of Church Hill's Fourth Baptist Church, Leonidas Young. Young whose church had as one of it's services a weekly feeding program had the following to say: "I have no intention of abiding by it. I will not, nor will I permit any of my parishioners to take a head count of those who are in need." Councilman Rudy McCullom charged Young with creating the ever popular "anarchy" as the rift in council personified the larger battle *between the forces of good VS evil over the basic human right of who can eat and where blew up.*

As if the news of the downtown B-4 zoning amendments wasn't enough to contend with, further trouble began to rise at the hands of one of the city's most elite civic organizations. The West Avenue Association began to leak word to the press over growing dissatisfaction with a nearby weekly feeding program on the 1600 block of Monument Avenue in the Fan district. The West Avenue Association claimed that the weekly barrage of drunk and disorderly homeless in the area was causing an element of fear in their community. They then researched and uncovered a highly overlooked city law pertaining to homeless meal programs that restricted meal providers to only feed up to 30 folks at a sitting and not more than seven times a year. If an organization chose to fight this they would be required to provide a \$1,000 conditional use permit fee that the city could then reject if it desired to do so. What followed was close to a year long battle throughout the city council chambers and in the state and federal courthouses over the constitutionality of these oppressive anti-

In the late fall of 1996 ASWAN began to uncover word of a series of city proposed zoning ordinances that had at their base the desire to drive the homeless community out of the downtown area. At the center of the ordinances was a law that would restrict any new service provider from opening up a service within 500 feet of an already existing service. The reasoning behind this played out in the local media and press over the next few months as a blatant and prejudiced attempt by city planners to credit the homeless presence in downtown as the single greatest deterrent to the city's lack of highly sought after tourist dollars. A botched attempt by the city to relocate the city's largest street center, the Daily Planet, to an out of sight locale near the city jail at 17th and O streets showed

In the latter months of 1996 several members of Food Not Bombs Richmond and the local anarchist collective I was involved with (General Strike) began working in close alliance with a Richmond area homeless organization called ASWAN. ASWAN is an acronym for A Society Without A Name (for people without a home). The group formed in mid '95 with the intent of constructing a homeless organization that had as its primary membership individuals who were either currently or



Spring 1997

I had moved to Richmond a year earlier, still very uncertain about myself, the decision I had just made and the frightening prospect of failure. I spent the better part of that first year unraveling the inner complexities of my life. I knew quite a few people, yet had no one to speak to. I knew my way around, yet had no sense of belonging. I was wandering the forgotten back alleys and streets of the city with a million ghosts feeling just as lost as they are, and then I found myself.

In my travels across the country I had been fortunate enough to visit and be welcomed into the homes of countless scores of inspirational folks striving to create a framework for the world of tomorrow, today. I asked lots of questions, I observed, I read and studied the history of communes, collectives and co-ops plotting and planning how I might begin to plant those seeds in my new found home of Richmond. Until spring '97 I never had a hope that I could make my dream a reality, when my dream finally did arrive it was a nightmare.

I was invited to move into 805 West Cary Street at a time that much was uncertain in my life, who my friends were, where to most appropriately channel my energy, and what in the hell was doing living in Richmond, Virginia? The 805 house had already been a staple in the Richmond punk rock community for years before I moved in. It was a decaying 1910's era brick framed row house or the northern most border of the Oregon Hill community.

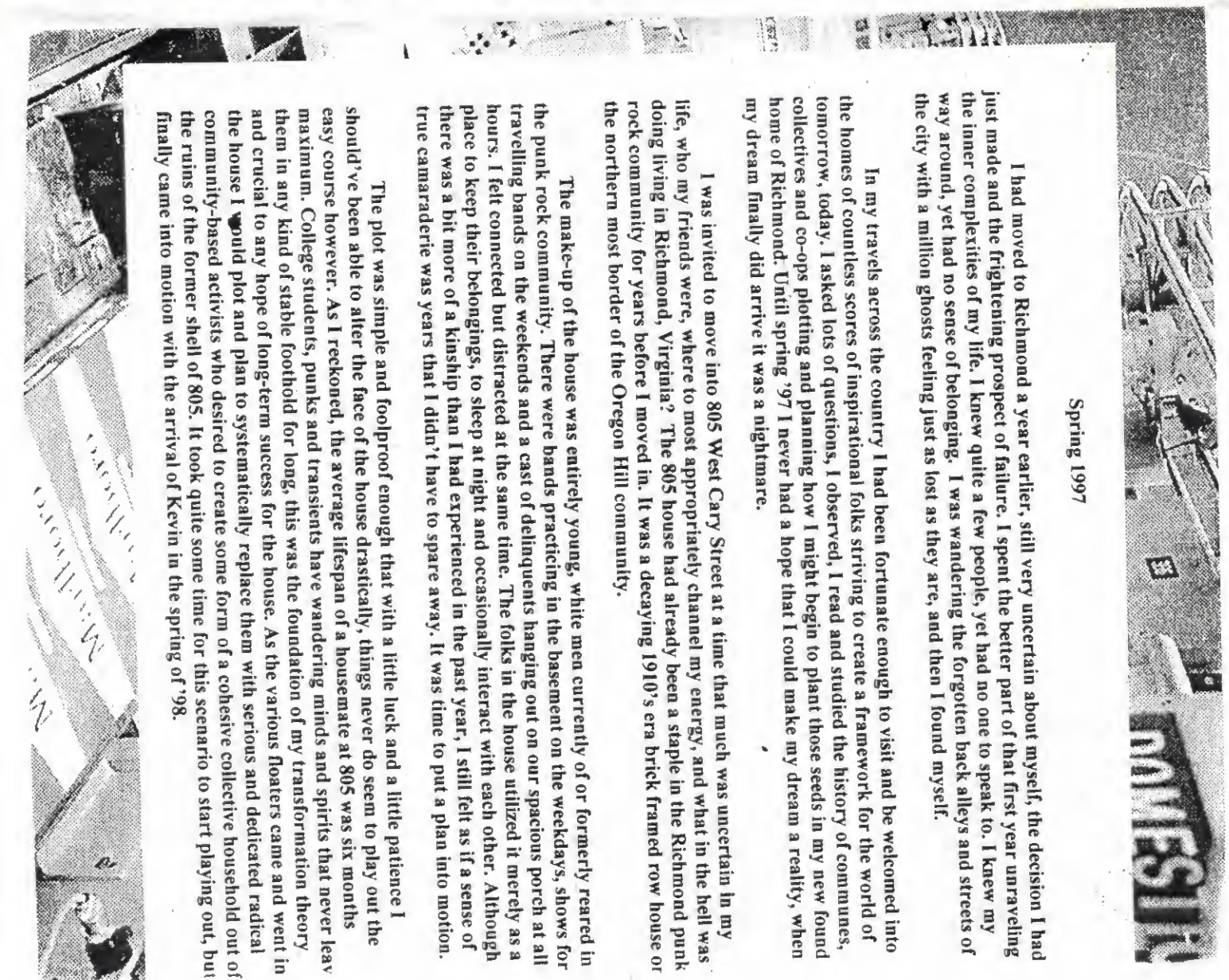
The make-up of the house was entirely young, white men currently of or formerly reared in the punk rock community. There were bands practicing in the basement on the weekdays, shows for travelling bands on the weekends and a cast of delinquents hanging out on our spacious porch at all hours. I felt connected but distracted at the same time. The folks in the house utilized it merely as a place to keep their belongings, to sleep at night and occasionally interact with each other. Although there was a bit more of a kinship than I had experienced in the past year. I still felt as if a sense of true camaraderie was years that I didn't have to spare away. It was time to put a plan into motion.

The plot was simple and foolproof enough that with a little luck and a little patience I should've been able to alter the face of the house drastically, things never do seem to play out the easy course however. As I reckoned, the average lifespan of a housemate at 805 was six months maximum. College students, punks and transients have wandering minds and spirits that never leave them in any kind of stable foothold for long, this was the foundation of my transformation theory and crucial to any hope of long-term success for the house. As the various floaters came and went in the house I would plot and plan to systematically replace them with serious and dedicated radical community-based activists who desired to create some form of a cohesive collective household out of the ruins of the former shell of 805. It took quite some time for this scenario to start playing out, but finally came into motion with the arrival of Kevin in the spring of '98.

"There's being in New York and then there's being in New York and thinking you're in love. When the steam on E. Houston dances around your ankles and the enchantment of August at 7pm on the Lower East Side will stop you from whatever you happen to be doing, including breathing." — Sera Bilizekian

"Born down in a dead man's town"
— Bruce Springsteen

"Measure your life in love"
— what all the taxicabs in New York read for awhile after "Rent" came out



managed to finish high school but did not dream of going to college. She was pregnant by the age of eighteen and rather than explore other possibilities they married immediately. My mother and father began working, leaving my sister with her grandmother. Both of them knew they would work for the rest of their lives.

Growing up poor in a society that places such high importance on the acquisition of material wealth can have several outcomes. (Of course the idea of poverty is based on an absurdly high living standard. In non-industrialized countries my grandparents' small house and few acres of land would be a large amount of wealth.) In some cases it can cause an individual to doubt their worth and ability. My mother spent years not accepting promotions because she was not certain she could handle a new set of responsibilities. It can cause people to pursue escapist activities or work away their lives for status symbols and name brands. It lands an increasing number of people in jail. But some break the cycle and get the hell out.

My parents lives have been marked by fear, regret, and hard work. When I was young it was hard for me to separate the drab jobs they worked from the rich traditions that had been handed down for generations. My father was a drunken Sisyphus who not only maneuvered metallic pieces of duct work but also plowed fields. The activities of canning fruit and digging potatoes seemed useless and shameful to me. I did not understand how menial actions related to real life. Hard work became the hallmark of wasted life. Watching my parents work, whether for themselves or for someone else, triggered in me a deep sense of mortality and an awful fear of death. I was plagued by the thought of my father living his life unknown, his careful planting and speculation disappearing with each season. I have been paralyzed by this fear at different times in my life, trying desperately to etch some part of me into stone.

Helping my parents with the land was not something that I enjoyed. It is not something that I tried to learn from. The activities of sustainability seemed like drudgery to me. It was years before I could see some of my family's way of living as compatible to the values that I eventually developed through involvement with the overlapping subcultures of punk rock and activism. Years before I could understand how they could save us from loneliness, from disempowerment, from death.

There was a point just before I left Tennessee that I realized the tradition that I had grown up in, of growing your own food, building your own house, and knowing how to repair the things that you use, was rapidly disappearing. I was sitting on my grandparents' porch and looking out over the empty driveway, the plowed earth, and the mountains. I began to wonder how many people my age had grown up the way I had. I realized some of the most fundamental rituals of our culture are being marginalized.

Technology is making physical work less and less necessary and increasing wealth among a certain class of people. There is little need to grow our own food or learn skills that apply to our lives. Everything that we eat is imported or grown nationally on large farms and available to us primarily through supermarket chains. Even though family farms make up the majority of farms, they are by and large monocultures that are dependent on corporations and government subsidies for pesticides, genetically modified seeds, machinery, gasoline, buyers, and manufacturers. Middle class Americans are able to separate themselves from the very things that keep them alive.

Unfortunately, the production and distribution of food is only one aspect of our economy that is falling under the control of increasingly large conglomerations. A drive through the suburbs and outskirts of almost any US city will turn up the same handful of chain stores, from fast food franchises to clothing stores to home improvement warehouses. More likely than not these establishments will exist in uniform and cheaply

Once word came down of council's decision there were several intense meetings in the Food Not Bombs camp over our highly public stance in opposition to the ordinances. We served quite possibly the most highly visible meal anywhere in the city. On an average summer day anywhere between 150-200 folks can come to Monroe Park to share in a FNB meal. ASWAN defenders were always hand in hand with us in our very visual weekly act of civil disobedience. Into the winter and following spring the high drama played out in the U.S. District Court in Richmond. In April of 1998 under severe scrutiny at the hands of the ACLU who was representing the embattled Stuart Circle Parishioners and several Church Hill and Northside area churches the council finally rescinded the laws from the books.

A packed house of hundreds of folks were on hand the night when the embattled council finally bowed under the weight of intense public scrutiny and ever developing legal battles. After word came down the council chambers melted down to only a scant few. The rest of us spilled out onto the steps of City Hall in jubilation. The victorious crowd was made up of lawyers, preachers, radicals, homeless, community activists, students and sympathetic friends and families. For that briefest of moments we all realized what a diverse and focused group of individuals are capable of accomplishing when putting the collective goal ahead of the individualist ethic.

Fall, 1997

"Yeah, yeah, yeah you do everything all the time. You take on every fucking

project and get everything done." I had just received the worst public tirade against myself since middle school and somehow I felt soothed by it. It was a crucial time. I was learning, struggling, pushing for something far greater and that tongue lashing oh so many years ago fanned my flames greater than Shawn could have ever imagined at the time. I slipped out of the meeting shortly thereafter taking the back alleys between Cary and Main streets all the way home to Oregon Hill. A fifteen minute walk that seemed to be the single biggest soul searching moment I had had in Richmond to that point.

I came upon my house and immediately noticed that there were dozens of strangers hanging out on the porch of the home that I lived in. I glanced upon them and nodded as I walked by as if I was passing any random house in a neighborhood miles away. I walked just past Laurel and went to a pay phone inside of the restaurant on the corner and called Shawn up. I told him how I was feeling inside, not just of the incident twenty minutes earlier but of the past year, of our relationship, my dreams, my Richmond of the future. He told me about his insecurities, how far we have to come and how valuable an asset he thought I was to the activist community here in town. I cried many times over that night.

I cried because I was beginning to come into my element, because I could truly grasp a sense of community, of belonging, of planting seeds that would grow into the tomorrow I so desperately desired. Shawn and I had discussed the merits of establishing long-term infrastructure that could be around for future generations to come and serve as a visual and direct bridge between the work that we were doing today and the incredible opportunities that would surely present themselves in time. The idea of creating an anarchist/collective living space in town that would serve as a virtual central nerve center for the blossoming community around us was a topic that we frequented often. We talked of projects and programs and a mutually beneficial, nurturing environment where we would no doubt take the city by storm.

made buildings strung together to form strip malls. They are surrounded by parking lots that have chewed up countryside or pushed people out of their homes. Businesses such as Wal-Mart and Home Depot almost invariably crush local competition because they are able to buy in bigger bulk, thus reducing prices. Other than producing a few minimum wage jobs they give nothing back to the community. I often imagine what this architecture and landscape will look like fifty years from now. There will be no chance of revitalizing these buildings, no reason to preserve them. They will be razed and something new will be set in their place.

Shortly before my mother left my father the company that she worked for, Levi-Strauss, closed its operations in Johnson City, Tennessee to take advantage of lower working wages overseas. The news left her devastated. My mother fell into a depression that she communicated to me through long telephone conversations. "I'm an old woman, honey. I can't be goin' out and leavin' new things this late." My mother is hardly aware of NAFTA, has never heard of the round of GATT agreements that ratified the World Trade Organization, but she has been affected by them.

As we race towards a global economy standards of living the wealthy enjoy continue to increase. Unfortunately these conveniences come at the cost of our environment, our health, the economies of Third World countries, the loss of thousands of domestic jobs, our culture and our diversity. The increasing gap between the things that effect our lives and our ability to control them have resulted in waves of disillusion and unease among American people. There is undeniable power in taking control of your life. What have we traded that power for?

While I was growing up I took for granted the huge bins of potatoes that lasted through the winter and the jars of canned food that were in the cellar almost year round. I didn't appreciate my grandnaw going up to the top of a mountain and coming back with her hands scratched up and her clothes stained with blackberry juice. I didn't understand that her cobbler came from all that work. I was a kid and didn't know any better. Unfortunately we are living in an entire culture that doesn't know any better. It is easier to be wasteful if you have no stake in or knowledge about the things that are being consumed. If someone eating fast food really understood the ramifications of it, would they still do it? I don't believe that everyone should become subsistence farmers, but I do believe that we should, as fully as we can, understand the consequences of our actions on the environment that we live in.

The hard work of my parents and grandparents no longer seems useless, but perhaps one of the most valuable and rapidly disappearing resources that we have. That hard work translates into the power of taking control of our lives. It was the garden that was largely the work of Greg and Loren that made me start thinking about all of these things again. Food is something so simple that many of us have the luxury of forgetting how important it is.

After a month spent traveling in the northeastern part of the country I came home for three days to move my things out of the house on South Cherry Street and to say goodbye. Hitchhiking in the northeast had been hell for JJ and I and we were very lucky that my ex roommates Greg Wells and Loren had decided to come to Philadelphia the same weekend as my status hearing for a charge I had incurred during the protests surrounding the Republican National Convention.

This continued to escalate to the point of delusional thought patterns and compulsive lying. How is one to begin to help a friend in need who one can't even be sure if they know or trust the friend themselves? This is a very puzzling question that I was asking myself daily. I began to have reckless sexual relationships with several folks and at least one long standing abusive relationship. After a while she lied so heavily and frequently that I often wouldn't find out a complete story until weeks or months after the fact. Things came to a head in late January when I told her that I had given all that I had and could no longer continue to be with her. The next morning she was in a hospital after taking a handful of pills and I was making plans to get as far away from Richmond as I could.

I arrived in the East Bay via greyhound after a 99 hour marathon trip full of optimism, hope and newfound vigor. Over the next two weeks I drowned myself in discussion groups, planning sessions, meetings, debates and countless hours of food not bombs meal preparations. I took long early morning walks through the Berkeley Hills and through the bustling Castro, Haight and Mission districts of S.F. I was befriended by the UC Berkeley hobo contingent who showed me where to sleep, where to eat and how to scam your way through just about everything. I saw as much of the inspiration as I could and hurried back east to the next chapter of my life.

I was starting to self-destruct right in front of me and I was walking the tight rope of emotional salvation and overbearing nuisance to her. She had quite possibly the lowest self esteem of anyone I've ever met and an uncanny ability to drive herself even deeper into the pit of despair when she was seemingly already at her lowest point. She was beginning to drink heavily and hang out with lots of folks who continuously wallowed in their misery. The pattern was consistent. "Greg I got drunk last night and did bad things." Like what I says, "well I did drug X and drug Z and think I had sex with so and so but can't really remember. Are you mad at me?"

The last thing she needed in her life was an obsessive boyfriend trying to tell her what to do and what not to do.

My partner of the last year plus and I were really going through it. I was trying to be the best of my abilities to try and tackle the myriad of problems we were having through constructive means, but was coming off as an authoritative figure in her life, the last thing I wanted to do. She was carrying around years of intense inner demons from a childhood that included an abusive relationship with her father, strangeness from her mother, relocation to another city away from her childhood and friends and was now coping with living with her grandparents in the far south side suburbs. The last thing she needed in her life was an obsessive boyfriend trying to tell her what to do and what not to do.

Winter 1998



We were two young twenty-somethings searching for our place, our calling. We talked above and beyond just a grand house. We talked of finding an old treasure of a building nestled in the heart of a long forgotten Richmond neighborhood to house a radical, community-based infoshop. Equal parts Panthers, Yippies and Wobblies. We actually physically went out and walked around searching for this mythical palace as if there would be a giant sign painted on the front of the building that read "warehouse/residential mixed unit available for free to the group of individuals with the best long-range development plan. Inquire within." If only things would have been that simple.

While in Philadelphia Wells and I met on Walnut Street for a Cornelia Parker exhibit. One of the pieces was two revolvers in the earliest stages of production. They were innocuous looking, even ridiculous, two flat vague pieces of metal. Looking at them I thought of some of the women I had met in jail, how silly and arbitrary circumstances sometimes lead to the partial ruin of our lives.

Other works included photographs of chalkboard equations by Einstein, exploded so that they looked like cirrus clouds, and the tackings from several JMW Turner paintings. A couple months later I would see two of Turner's paintings in the Chicago Institute of Art and think for a long time about what used to lay behind them. The tackings are squares of canvas stained and brown, looking burnished, bronzed, impossibly old; what had happened to them? But his actual paintings are layers and layers of paint depicting the tossing sea, thick opaque splatters of white show the heaviest parts of the foam. The water is bearing down from all sides, it is everywhere, it is the entire picture. The fishing boats in the distance look as if they have been scratched out of the storm rather than painted on it. It was a shock to see them, hanging in the entrance of a room I had not planned on entering, to see them not five feet away instead of the size of a postage stamp in a book. How long had it taken to paint the storm, thousands of tons of water, dozens of men, four boats swirling, hardly staying afloat? Where did the idea come from, what was the first stroke, what color, when did he know to stop? To look at them is to feel your lungs swell, your chest widen. It is as if you are being invaded with water, as if you will tip over into nothing.

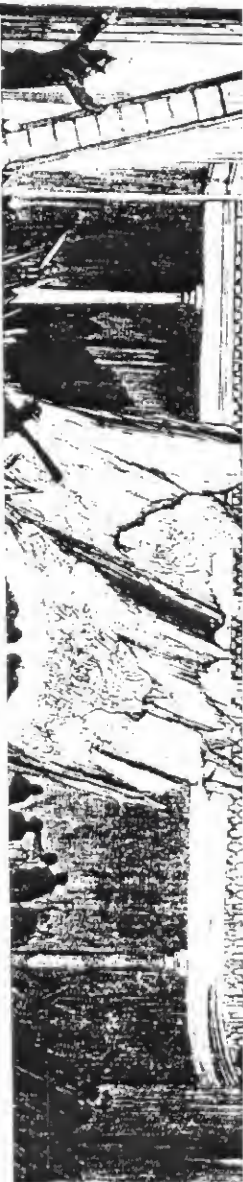
After the museum Wells and I walked to Clark Park, located in West Philadelphia at 43rd and Baltimore. "This park is full of characters," he proclaimed, but I wouldn't know. I haven't really spent any time there. We talked for awhile of the way our lives had meandered for the past five weeks. And then he wanted to talk about my feelings about 325 South Cherry Street. "So now that you've moved out what are some things that you've learned? What advice could you give to folks who are starting up a collective? In what ways were you disappointed? How do you feel we could be of larger service to the community? How could we improve relationships within the house?" He also talked of the very urgent need to begin building infrastructure in Richmond. "There's only so much we can do and only so far we can reach out with no spaces for it to happen in." It was this conversation and these questions that made me decide to write this essay.

Being out of town for a few weeks enabled me to think of the house in a new light. Not as a conglomeration of intense or partially ruined personal relationships, but a necessary step in the direction of developing an infrastructure around which a radical community could grow. When we had come together to create the house most of us had slightly different versions of the same goal: a space where meetings and free schools could take place, a library open to people other than housemates, an environment where we could grow as individuals, learn how to interact in positive ways with other people, navigate personal relationships, and diffuse disputes. Unfortunately these desires were never formally discussed. When we first moved in Becky (now RJ) made a proposal that we sit down and talk about goals for the household. Others maintained that that these would appear organically, that our visions were probably so similar that we didn't need to talk about them, at least not in the beginning. We were all in love with the front and back yards, the three porches, high ceilings and large rooms, and the prospect of exploring one another.

The car ride from Philly to Richmond was long. JJ and I squashed into the tiny backseat along with our two packs and a few dozen books. Loren was cold as ice the entire drive, rarely speaking to me, and continued to be for most of my three day visit.

The Richmond Autonomous Zone had its grand opening on January 23rd and was faced with a mountain of problems from the get go. It was stationed in a basement on the 1000 block of Park Street just a stones throw away from the western edge of the VCU campus near Harrison. The basement was a minimal amount of space in a household of several young college students who concocted the plan to open an "autonomous zone" in their basement during their winter break from VCU, novel idea indeed.

To enter the space you had to cut back behind a row of houses, knock on a rear door, hope someone was home who a) knew that such a place existed in their basement at all b) would bother to lead you in and c) that you fit the general image/styling of their notions of what was acceptable. Despite the aforementioned we managed to utilize that musty old basement for all it was worth. The collective I worked with met there weekly. There was a free food bin, that was stocked regularly and many a video presentation, discussion and debate took place in our cramped quarters. Due to the presence of an actual (albeit rudimentary) physical space we met new faces by the truck load. In that basement between January-March of '98 I met Becky, Kevin, Keith and my future partner Yvonne. Regardless of our severe inability to be able to transform the space into any long term community space the amazing new faces and friendships that had their roots in that basement have gone on to evolve into the pillars of everything important that exists in my life today. After the revolution it will no doubt be declared a protected historic anarchist site for the metro Richmond area.



After the summer long battles with the city over the fascist anti-poor zoning ordinances I had thought long and hard about the enormous amount of time and commitment that so many of us had put forth towards combating the popular misconceptions of the homeless dilemma here in Richmond. Did our tokenistic meal programs really begin to brake down any barriers? Was all of our radical rhetoric merely just lip service? Were we pushing forth with any concrete analysis or dialogue that would truly challenge the inadequacies of the situation? Unfortunately the answer to all of those questions and many more just like them was a resounding NO.

A small handful of us began to ask ourselves some very simple questions in hopes of beginning to put forth a very anarchistic approach at solving some of these looming problems. We came up with a simple yet effective plan to begin the process of liberating as many of the city's 4,000 plus vacant properties to transform them into covert squats as we could manage. We scouted houses, asked around who might be in need and began to put some of the puzzle together. WB was a natural choice for a place as we had known and worked with him for quite some time, he was low key and had a working knowledge and history of squatting in neighborhoods all over the city. When I guided him through the cool winter night to his new residence my mind was running 100's of miles at once, anticipating the no doubt dozens of similar placements yet to come. At last we were filling a deep, fundamental need.

what remained of our relationship felt like me jagged edges of a decadal. Neither of us knew how to navigate it. Before seeing her I felt confident that my five weeks of hitchhiking, walking, and almost getting arrested would have given me the skills to do so. I could tell from the moment when we said hello that I was wrong.

I knew that going back for a few days after I had moved out would be hard, but I hadn't expected to feel so constantly abraded, as if I might burst into tears at any moment. I felt bruised, filled with a tenderness and regret that was almost too much for me to communicate. I sensed that most of the people that I had lived with were glad that I was leaving and I was sick with the knowledge. The wounded relationships that I had left five weeks before felt impossibly broken. The waves of depression that assailed me that summer rose up to the surface and I started to feel worse than I had since leaving.

I stood out in the garden staring more out of shock than anything else. The garden was slowly sinking into the earth, but it was beautiful. And I had been too dull and faded to have any real part in it. I knew I'd have to go in the house and try to make amends with the person I had been and the people I had lived with for the past year or I'd never achieve what I was trying to do by traveling.

People from larger cities always ask why the fuck anyone would want to move to Richmond, Virginia. I shrug the question off now. I'll say, "I'm not too sure why anyone would want to live there. It's a nice place to visit though." But there was a time when it pissed me off, the arrogance that anything is better than a small southern city. I could start by telling them about my room in my parent's trailer in the Appalachian mountains, the history of lynchings in the next town over, or the rate of teenage pregnancy. I could talk about the small backwards university and the lack of any radical subculture, the terrible exhaustion that comes from battling loneliness. I could talk about how just about anything was alright as long as I got out. Usually I make the story much less complicated. I talk about the thick beauty of the city and the strangletold it put on me the first time I visited. I talk about the James, the leaning houses, the smell of the air in summer months, the late night bike rides through Churchhill, the huge hills and old buildings, shadows appearing and disappearing with the streetlights. What I don't mention is that Richmond made me realize that beauty, no matter how palpable and affecting, is not enough.

My first house in Richmond was a crumbling structure that had hosted punk shows for the better part of nine years. It sat on West Cary Street across from a Virginia Commonwealth University parking lot. I came to 805 for the first time for an Avail show. Boys were hanging out on the front porch when I got there. The heat was like a blast furnace. I was intoxicated by their messy rooms and easy ways, their huge record collections. I tried to imagine living in the house and I could not. I was too conscious of the holes in the floors, the leaking bathrooms, the small puddles of piss around the toilet.

A few months later Greg Wells and Chris offered me the living room to share with my best friend Sera for only \$37.50. It had been long enough for me to forget the things I hated about the house and I decided to take it. I moved in on August 1, 1998.

My first few months in Richmond I spent thinking I'd never fully get my head around the beauty of the city and I was right. Even when I left, two years later, I felt like I had only scratched the surface of it. Even the ruin of the house, something that had initially seemed so distasteful to me, became beautiful. I loved the lone planks of wood that covered the floors, the dirt between them deep and impenetrable. The threshold to the kitchen was strangely spongy; the black and white tiles soaked up water and curled upward whenever we would mop. The bathroom was tiny, painted a hideous red. The

let the festivities roll on uninterrupted as we longed to take up to up to many parking spaces out back and rarely even customary cleaning. It was what it was, a flop house, a place that never was viewed in its proper historical context of a time capsule whose life was slipping away. Mike Moses pretty much

ceased to exist and be valid many moons ago. The house had been made for close to a decade. If there ever was a lease, it

disposable income. Every aspect of their enterprise relies heavily upon the campus, its students and their VCUCU students. Behind half of the 800 block of Cary Street to parishioners at the nearby Catholic Cathedral and Burrito bar and lounge. In addition to the buildings they own, they lease out a fifty car parking lot on the intersection across Laurel and Cary from them which is currently occupied by Bandito's and has been in their family for well over forty years. They also own 803 West Cary and the building door to the 805 house. Paragon has been a continuously running pharmacy in Oregon Hill since 1904, family for many years. Charles and his son Mike own and operate the Paragon Pharmacy right next

The house which was built circa 1910 has been owned and leased out by the Charles Moses

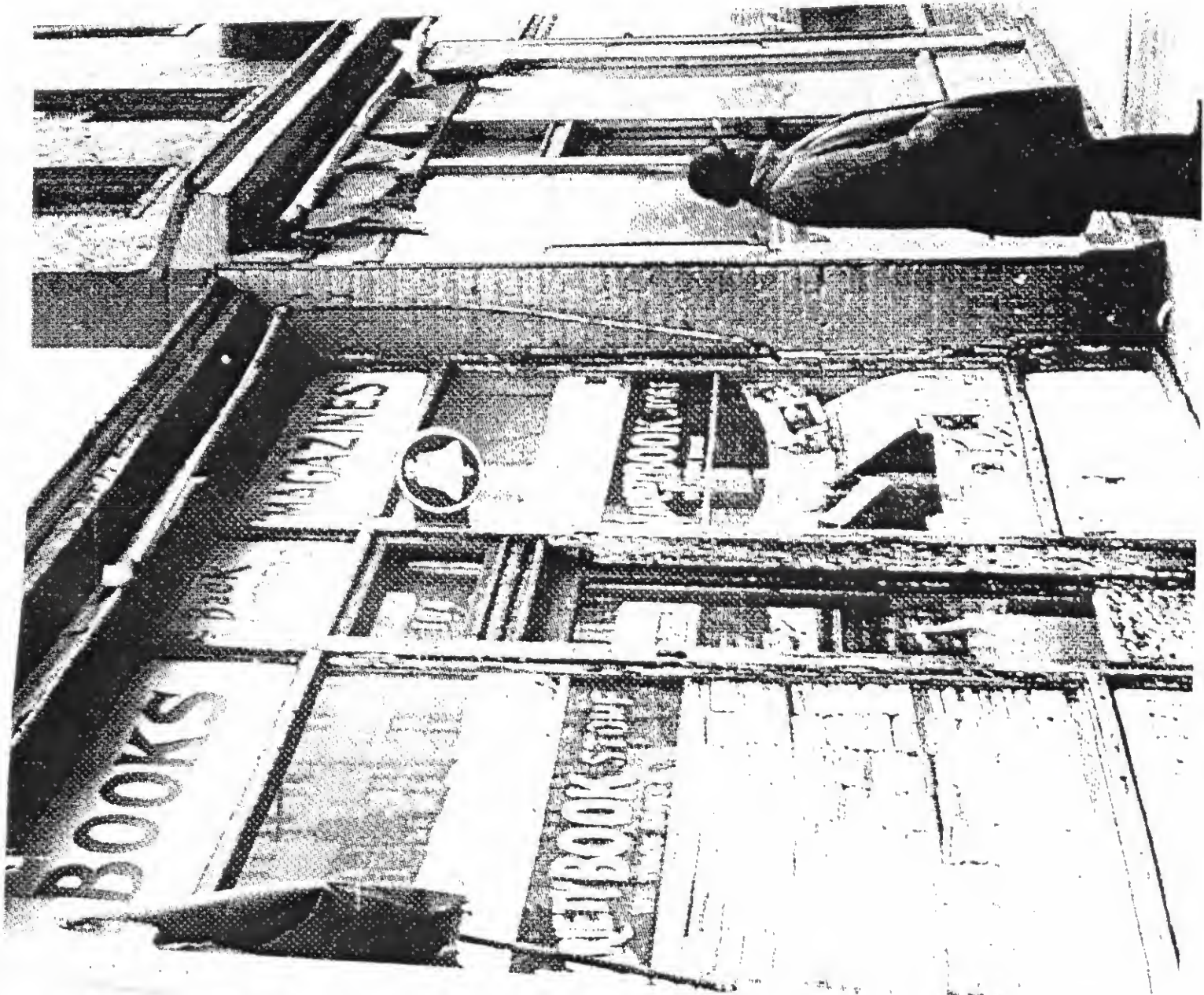
being carried out with VCUCU's, a slow burning fire that may some day burn out of control. The Jackson Ward, but is instead a slow burning fire that may some day burn out of control. The housing widespread gentrification. It's not quite as explicit as the more systematic devastation of the hill has been slowly evolving since at least the 1970's. The inexpensive gradual occupation of the hill has been slowly evolving since at least the 1970's. The much more neighborhood north of the downtown expressway has long since been defeated, the entire of the

the air, as if the entire neighborhood is saying we made it again.

yearly new fall semester as the great invasion. In the spring when the last of the students pick up, pack up and retreat to mommy and daddy for the summer a collective sigh of relief blows through the century plus old residency of Oregon Hill and the Richmond of tomorrow where massive university structures are now dotting the landscape. Folks close to the border often time refer to the

running out of it.

Kevin had just completed his required residency at the student dormitory across Cary Street that had forever altered the physical landscape of the community when it was completed in the 80's. Now he was moving several hundred feet away into 805. Cary became the official boundary between the century plus old residency of Oregon Hill and the Richmond of tomorrow where massive university structures are now dotting the landscape. Folks close to the border often time refer to the



This is the front where gentrification is being nurtured on the hill. It's a mutually beneficial slumlord/student relationship. Although Mike and his family have decades old roots on the hill it's no secret about his true feelings on the neighborhood. I remember well a conversation we had one day at the pharmacy where he related for me his frustration that the VCU deal of 1990 didn't go through. No matter however, as long as there were a steady supply of students to rent to, sell parking to and slumlord prosper. The slumlord prospers when students who have no vested interest in the sustainability of the community move in to an aged neighborhood. They help create an outward appearance of safety, of diversity and help paint the landscape rosy for continued real estate speculation.

The aforementioned Bandito's Bar and the 821 Bakery Café down the block are the first two major gentrification fronts in the area. Although the Bakery Café is owned and operated by hill residents, it like Bandito's caters almost exclusively to the twenty something VCU student population. It's a rare day when you see a native hill resident having coffee or breakfast at the very non-hill pricey 821 or sipping a beer after hours at the frat bar atmosphere of Bandito's. Meanwhile a house the makeup of 805 is by far and away the most serious threat to the long-term upkeep of the community.

Those who live there have no desire to begin to rehabilitate a place that was in shambles when they got there and that they have no possibility of ever owning. Years of continuous wear leave the house with virtually no chance of survival, and the slumlord with the likely option of condemning buildings are boarded up the more the social fabric of the neighborhood is deteriorated, the more likely the neighborhood is for a city sponsored urban renewal program, the more likely the neighborhood is to become a relic of bygone years in the Valentine Museum archives room. This is where Jackson Ward, Carver and Oregon Hill are fighting like hell to stay away from.

Summer 1998

Becky spent her better part of her first year in Richmond bogged down in the frustrating tedious nature of radicalizing the student body it could be very disheartening indeed. One has to truly have an inner drive to break free of the shackles of the university to ever know that there is a great big world outside of it. I often times wonder what percentage of promising young student activists become completely and totally burned out by the time their sophomore year rolls around, lost forever. This was the path that Becky was obviously on. How she had the capacity to catch this early and strove to buck the odds and introduce herself to our insular little world amazes me to this day.

The first time Becky got up the courage to attend a General Strike Collective meeting in the basement of the Richmond Autonomous Zone the entire meeting was accidentally locked in the moved by something that was discussed or amused by our embarrassing predicament because she not only came back but very quickly became an intricate piece of not only the collective but our lives. In her pre-college days Becky had run the gamut of teenage inner turmoil. I got the sense that she was living for her self for the first time in her life. The sense that she was free of the trappings of northern Virginia, her over protective parents and of the past that she had never been able to leave behind until that moment.

Kim and Sera had been writing each other for years. Their relationship blossomed despite the seemingly endless amount of distance that separated them. They were distant in both the literal sense of being separated by hundreds of miles and figuratively in the sense of their characteristics seemed night and day. Despite all of this they feed off of each other's energy better than any two could ever hope to. They were like the missing jigsaw pieces to the other's life that was only complete when they came together. "Sera and I are both very excited about moving to Richmond (as you can probably tell). Neither one of us are very happy in our respective cities. Moving is like our chance to take control of our lives, to start over, to (maybe) be happy, or something like that."

Kim and Sera moved to Richmond in July of '86, into what was up until that time the living room of 805. Their presence in the house and in my life brightened things up immeasurably. There was a certain feel to the house that never existed before, we were a crew, a unit and nothing could disrupt that or so I thought. In the weeks leading up to Kim's arrival I continuously feed Becky lines about how she and Kim were destined for each other and how it was inevitable that they were going to hook up. It almost became predestined after so much hype. I'm not sure exactly what it was that led me to this conclusion but sure enough they were together almost from day one. After a while Kim became such a permanent fixture at Becky's apartment that I questioned why she even bothered paying rent at 805.

Sera seemed at odds almost from the get go. Her life moved much to fast for the snail speed crawl of Richmond. At the beginning of September we went on a cross country journey through the midwest into Canada and all the way down the western seaboard to the bay area, by the time we returned her days in Richmond were already over. She was like a comet that flashed through our world for the briefest of times but had to keep trekking on to reach her final destination, wherever that might be.

When Yvonne was a teenager she branded her upper chest above her heart with an anarchist symbol. Thousands of kids all over the world have probably carried out this same venture as a means to claim something of their own. A sense of identity, individuality, rebellion. The first thing I noticed about Yvonne when she walked into my life three years ago was her sense of raw energy. She was taking the first steps on a long and venturous path of self-discovery. I remember well walking through the campus of the local university that night with her as she pushed and prodded her way into our secret little world. A world that had been eluding her for countless years and which she was ready to dive into full on. I was in love from the beginning.

After months of swelling nervous tension and indecisiveness I decided to spill words and heart onto paper and let fate and time decide if my assumptions were anything more than blind guesses. I sent the letter that was my passport to my future to Y in September of '86. The next six weeks of my life while I traveled up and down the West Coast were filled with sleepless nights of anxiety and days of unfulfilled dreams. I had no idea what to expect when I returned to Richmond, but never would have imagined what I found when I got there.

8661 Fall

I arrived home in October to a setting that was so bizarre that it seemed as if I had stepped into a Hollywood script. During the short durations with Y. Suddenly I felt as if I was just another in a string of love hungry fools who were probably seriously intimidating Y and almost certainly chasing her far, far away from our beloved radical ranks. The plot only thickens from there.

toilet rocked back and forth when you sat down and near the end it finally fell through. The couch on the front porch was broken, the tiny front yard choked with weeds. Long black marks covered the walls, fingerprints, elbow stains, stains from bike pedals and handle bars. There were rats and cockroaches in the kitchen but I didn't care. There was freedom in that decay and in the wide sweep of the summer air.

It's summer that I remember most at 805 even though I never spent an entire summer there. Greg Wells would turn his speakers around to face the street and his stereo up loud so that you could hear it from a block away. We spent hot mid days on the front porch with Guns n Roses playing so loudly it was hard to talk. There I was redipped into the baptismal font of rock n roll. Dirty river water dried on my skin all summer long. I'd get wet every time I walked into the house. A hydrant poured into the street a few blocks south in Oregon hill. I'll think about Axl Rose and the boys I spent my early adolescence with and the rough talk we used to handle while biking through the spray of water.

"Appetite for Destruction" is an album that still sells ten thousand copies a week thirteen years after it was released. I used to listen to it and watch my cousin Bobby work on cars. Or me and my cousin Randy would listen to it on our grandmother's shaded back porch. I was too young and uneducated to notice how fucked up the lyrics were then. The album seemed to get under their skin in a way that I couldn't understand, made them restless and full of big talk about how they were getting out of town, how they were going to be something besides factory workers. Listening to it years later I could hear the urgency in those guitar riffs, all the sweat and stress and ambition of five young men trying to live a dream.

It was the music I loved most about that house. I didn't mind putting up with the rank smell or even the dumb boys that lined our porch some evenings. Some days Adam would go out with a forty around one in the afternoon, the Pixies coming from the open door. Boys would drift down Cary street and come to our door, start talking to Adam, walk up to Fine Food for a six pack and by five o'clock there would be a dozen or so drunken punk rockers throwing cigarette butts into the square of our yard and piling up beer bottles to recycle. I felt more and more like a boy during this time, so much that I was a little puzzled when I had to sit down to pee.

Life at 805 was easy. I worked at a thriftstore, had a girlfriend, wrote steadily, listened to records, and stayed out late. I realized shortly after I moved there that I had everything I had ever wanted. It didn't take me long to start wanting more.

I began having illusions of collective dinners and shared food costs, but after a few weeks it became apparent that the members of 805 would never be able to split a grocery bill, much less anything else. We were like black balls rolling around over the dented spaces of two floors. Sometimes we ran into each other on the way to our rooms or out the door.

In late spring, fed up with the disjointed relationships of the people that lived at 805, Wells started throwing around the idea of starting a collective house. It seemed like exactly what I needed. I became more and more disenchanted with life at 805 and started spending almost all my time at Becky's apartment. Will and Loren, recent additions to the house, were also excited about the idea. Will and Loren were something of a mystery to the rest of us. They were very quiet and we all regarded them with some manner of curiosity. They were thin apparitions, the floor of their room covered with the pieces of junked bikes. Most of us gave him a wide berth, thinking the bike parts were strange, but beautiful. I knew that part of their silence had to do with the shitty environment of 805. I was confident that in a new space where we were working together for a common goal we would surely get to know one another.

The remaining four members were left with the decision to find other people to move in or move out themselves. Our landlord made the decision for them when he came over one morning to evict us.

805 had long since stopped doing shows, but we had a little get together our last night there. PCP Roadblock, a Richmond band known for getting drunk and making a mess, destroyed our house that night. Couches flew through the two large front windows and onto the tiny ailing garden. Will and Loren had planted after picking all the cigarettes and glass out of the earth. Some dumb punk caught himself on fire. Rotten watermelons and expired gallons of milk decorated the walls. Walking by 805 weeks later I spied watermelon vines growing up out of the rubble.

I left town in May of '99 to hitch around the southeastern part of the country with Sera. When I got back Becky had found a beautiful old house in Oregon Hill. With two floors, four bedrooms, a front and back yard and three porches, it was an ideal space for our needs. The landlord was a wishy-washy fellow who lived next door. After numerous unreturned phone calls the six of us marched to his door and practically begged him to let us pay \$900 a month for the place. It wasn't until we had lived there for a few months and befriended some neighborhood folks that we learned that was between three and four hundred too much. Clay was using our rent to pay the mortgage on both of his houses and we were setting a new standard for how high rents could go in that neighborhood.

When we finally received and signed the lease Clay let us know that he was knocking fifty dollars from our rent in restitution for the work we were planning on doing. He didn't seem to care about the house, the neighborhood and its history, or any other part of the city as far as I could tell. Months later when some members of the house talked to him about his unfair rent gauging and the deterioration of parts of the house, the bastard let us know he'd come down on the rent ten whole dollars.

Oregon Hill is a predominantly white working class neighborhood with a smattering of artists, hipsters, and students. It is only a few blocks north of the rocky waters of the James and lies just west of downtown. Multiple generations of families live there. Children grow up and die there. Over the years it has been cut in half by an expressway and partially decimated by the Virginia Commonwealth University and the Ethyl Corporation. In summer months the smell of Ethyl, similar to the smell of formaldehyde, fills up the air. It sneaks in and becomes part of your consciousness. On returning from long trips I was glad to breathe in that awful smell. It meant that I was home.

Oregon Hill is the neighborhood that caused me to fall in love with Richmond in the first place. Descriptions of it have appeared in almost every story I've written over the two years I lived in Richmond. I've written about the gunslingers, the kids that go running fearless through the yards and alleyways, kids that on occasion use 325's back porch as base for tag. Boys that ride bicycles way too tall for them, standing up on the pedals, seat reaching past their waist, roaring down the uneven sidewalks and over the streets. I don't like to think about the world getting hold of them, because the world is going to subvert their strength. Or twist it into something ugly. You only have to look up the street at the older boys hanging out on the corner of Laurel and Albemarle to see it happening. Looking at them now, at the age of ten, they seem impossibly strong; they could fall off rooftops and start to fly in midair.

A photograph taken in the Hill today would look as if it were taken decades ago. Minus the cars parked on the street, it's hard to imagine that time moves at all on the 300 block of Laurel. In the afternoon men line the porches with cans of beer at their feet.

I had been in town for three whole days already and needless to say I was a nervous wreck. Y surely knew I was back and as of yet no phone call, no drop by, not a sign that she came by my house to me. So today was the day I was taking the initiative to track her down. Shawn came by my house and we were going on a bike ride when the topic of Y came up. He told me of their late night conversations and of the poetry he had written her and how he was very seriously considering exposing his growing emotions for her. I was stunned. I quickly told him of the letter and the nervous tension that had been rising in my guts for months. We stopped just outside of the student commons where she was working and decided to go in one at a time to talk to her. It was truly ridiculous that we did this but seemed to make perfect sense at the time.

During our brief conversation she failed to mention a word of receiving the letter. My mind raced a thousand miles an hour. Did it get lost in the mail, was it stolen, did a lazy roommate misplace it, or worse of all did she think it was cute and discard it. I was a complete wreck. We vowed to get together real soon and catch up. I spent a lot of the rest of the day talking with Shawn of our strange predicament. We shared stories, experiences and conversations that we had each had with Y and talked of the inevitable questions that were mounting in front of her. We talked of our friendship and likely scenarios that might play out if one of us becomes involved with Y. It was a fascinatingly ridiculous conversation that made me wonderfully happy.



We went on a tour of crumbling Richmond neighborhoods. Northside, Church Hill North, down through the warehouse district across the 14th Street bridge into the heart of the community formerly known as Blackwell. We talked of white flight, displacement, gentrification and of the death of the urban community. It was devastating and hopelessly romantic all at once. At the end of our evening out back behind 805 as she was preparing to leave she let me know that she had received the now mythical letter and was waiting for the right moment to approach me on its contents. That moment had arrived. She spoke of insecurity and confusion and of the mess of folks bumbling at her feet in the past few weeks and how much trouble she was having dealing with it all. She went on to speak of the letter and how much it meant to her and how she had no idea I felt the way I did. She wanted to discuss things further sometime soon and would be in touch.

A few nights later we wound up at her decrepit old house in Church Hill. She shared her photo albums, her childhood memories and her desires. I told her of my move to Richmond, my rebirth since arriving here and of the future that I wanted to create here. The hours melted away in the brisk fall weather as we embraced, laughed and tip toed our way through numerous tense moments. A half an hour before the sun arose we crept across the cobblestone desolate streets of the city to a lookout perched high above the eastern edge of Richmond. We walked down an overgrown decaying aged stairwell to a place of tranquility where we seemed to be the only two people in the city. As we lay on our backs and the cool autumn air surrounded us scarcely a word was spoken. We tracked back through the first rays of sunshine and into Y's house where we shared our first kiss and our first sleepover. That was two years ago this month.

In the time since I have learned more about communication and relationships and mutual aid and solidarity then I could have learned by reading a hundred books by dead anarchists. We have grown and evolved and nurtured one another into better individuals and a much more complete whole. It truly amazes me to this day how far a whim can take you.

It was literally a couple of days later when I was sifting through my pile of unanswered mail that I came across a letter from a former Virginian who was now residing in Boston. "I'm here in Boston as a sort of refugee from the south, figuring I should go where something was already happening, and that organizing anything I wanted to do back in Virginia would be fucking futile. I've been thinking more and more these days that I should move closer back to where I came from." We met briefly in Philly a few weeks later and again at the food not bombs house he was living in in Boston around the end of November. By this time he was already well on his way to Richmond.

Will as he quickly became known for name clarity purposes, was not the type of person who would just up and move to Richmond. A focused, dedicated visionary who moved into the old living room at 805 with a computer, scores of trash picked bike parts and a plan of action that would keep him busy for a solid ten years. He wasted no time in making his presence felt by taking on substantial projects and always seeing them through. He was a welcome sight and a grand addition to the 805 transformation plan.

I vaguely remember meeting Loren while in Massachusetts that November and heard very little about her in the time preceding her arrival in Richmond. Loren moved into the room with Will with seemingly nothing but the clothes on her back. Her and Will seemed to be living a secret life that none of us knew anything of. They would disappear for entire days and return to retreat to their room without so much as a glimpse of the two of them. It was easy for these habits to sprout up at 805 though. There were no true common areas minus the porch and the kitchen and everyone lead their own lives far removed from the cramped confines of the house. I knew next to nothing of Loren during those months and laid the framework for a rocky start to someone that would go on to become a crucial person in my life for years to come. Communication never has been one of my strong points.

I was beginning to realize that regardless of the make up of the house, that you cannot artificially create a mutually respective household out of thin air. The physical landscape of the house and its immediate surroundings did nothing to help matters. There were gaping holes in the floor, ceiling and walls. Rotting wood that saw its best days decades before I was born. A crumbling and crooked porch whose columns were one major storm away from tumbling down. At night I would curse and moan the 500 watt illuminating flood light perched high upon the parking deck across the street from the front of the house. At day I would curse and moan the endless swarm of tractor trailers dropping off supplies at the frat bar on the corner. I felt as if the grind of it all was busting my will into pieces. I was on the verge of my first ever full-blown crisis, I wasn't even twenty five yet.

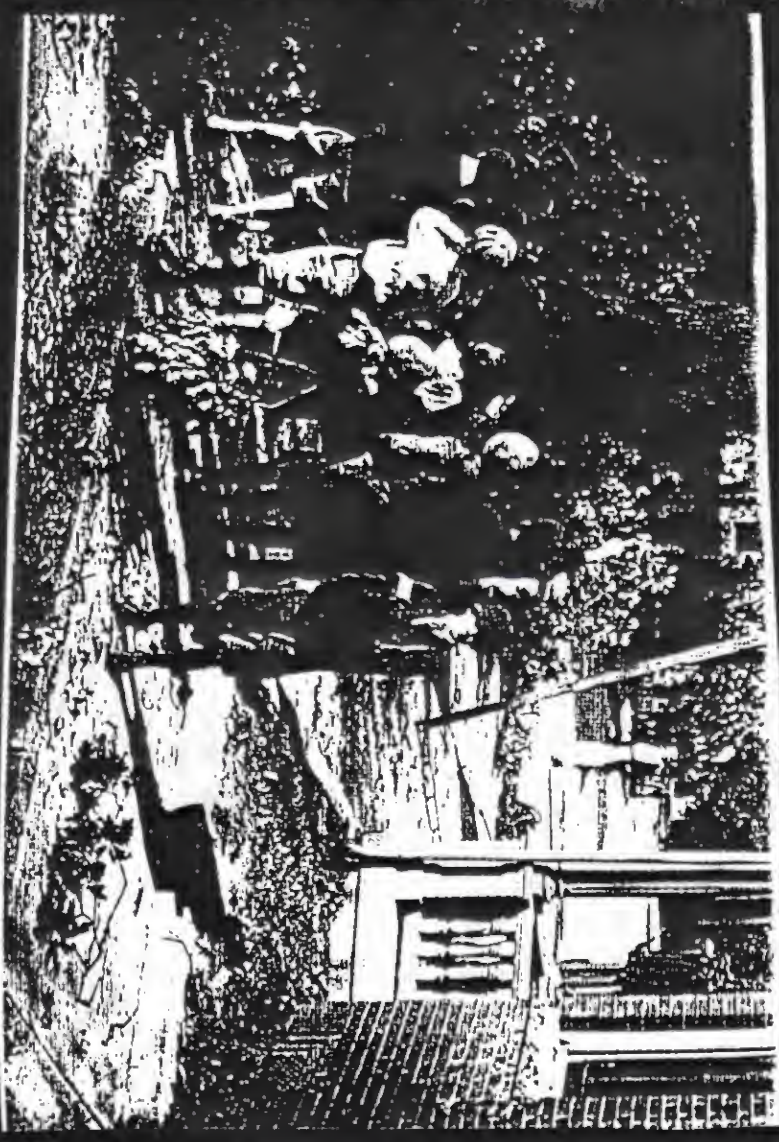
Spring 1996

By the time the spring of '96 rolled around I had given two very trying years of my life to the notion that bringing together a cast of transplanted parts under one roof automatically created a loving, nurturing environment. I was hopelessly naïve at best and hopelessly disillusioned at worse. It was this setting, this time, that led to the beginning of the end of 805 and any hopes of it becoming anything other than what it was always pre destined to be. A pawn with the intent of further blurring the face of a neighborhood that it belonged to in physical space only.

They could be field hands or factory workers; they could be standing in bread lines during the Great Depression. Women sweep the porches sometimes, wearing old dresses or faded blue jeans. The lines on their faces are like the lines on the face of my mother, hair cut short and burnt up by perms. Many afternoons after passing that block I would be in tears by the time I reached my front gate, thinking of the men my father has called his friends, the women whose faces and bodies are so similar to my mother. She has led a hard life and it shows. How could I tell her that her life is incomprehensible to me, that I cannot think of her days without bursting into tears?

The block is loud on summer evenings, people talking over porch railings and hanging out in the street. People swap stories and pass around beer and cigarettes. Their accents are almost indecipherable to me now. Even though I'm white and grew up working class these people pull back when I walk by. With my thick glasses and greased up hair, I'm not one of them anymore.

I've become part of a classless class, an unaccounted for group of individuals who practice something called voluntary poverty. We choose to gain our living from the excess and privilege of others. After being on the road for six months I've started to feel completely subterranean, passing through hidden places of autonomy and resistance, emerging only occasionally into the mess that is American culture. Stepping into a shopping mall or movie theater, I may as well be setting foot on the fucking moon.



Collective living is important because it is one of the most fundamental ways that we can challenge consumer capitalist culture. In a collective living situation sharing possessions displaces the importance of private property. It challenges the concept of traditional family structures. It is a conscious effort to improve interpersonal relationships and work on personal flaws in order to improve our abilities to communicate. Hopefully those communication skills and respectful ways of relating to people will radiate outward into everyday work, neighborhood, and casual relationships. It is important that we are able to compassionately communicate with people who are different from us. This is the most basic brick to building community.

The word community has grown larger and larger in my mind in the months since leaving Richmond. Almost every city I've passed through I've witnessed community in some form or another and felt almost sick realizing that currently I am not part of one. It could be argued that I am part of a larger transient activist community, but this is not what I'm looking for. I need a house to go home to, a group of nurturing housemates, a city to work in. The road is fine sometimes but it stretches on and on. You could get lost out here, be on it for years and years with nothing to show but a fuckload of memories.

But if I didn't have a large radiating sphere of people that I know are interested in the same things as me and working towards the same goals then my loneliness would probably consume me. I would have to find other ways to fill myself up. Would I take up drinking, go to college, start shopping? It's hard to resist the fundamental loneliness of human existence. It's important to stand against that, to care for one another, and what happens to the world.

The alternative to community is commodity. It is to define life in terms of items acquired and consumed. Loving one another is a way to combat the destructive forces of our culture. By moving into 325 I wanted to closely observe the machinery of myself and improve it. I wanted to see how these other five vibrant people worked. I wanted to know what we could possibly build together.

It's hard to live in a town like Richmond. The drain on creativity and intelligence is enormous. The interest in political and any other kind of projects are low. The houses are filled with beer swilling college kids that don't give a shit about the history of the city, the structure of the houses, or the havoc they're wreaking on the urban neighborhoods of Richmond. Unlike the poor people of the city, they are moving on to bigger and better things.

The unspoken criteria for moving into 325 South Cherry was 'You must be terrified to waste time.' Everyone who lived there was consumed with this or that project, some more obvious than others. I worked on short stories and sketches for a novel. Wells took over one corner of the library to work on his zine and research the history of the city. Will filled an entire room with an ever expanding array of bike frames and parts. These would eventually become Richmond's first (to my knowledge) bike library. Loren worked on a series of art and building projects, tutored children with low reading levels, and transformed our back yard into an edible paradise. Becky and Yvonne worked with various political groups.

It's scary to think of the amount of energy we put into our projects and what a low return we sometimes receive. Will I be banging around when I'm thirty, doing the same small scale things with the same group of people? There must be a way around just barely scratching out an existence. There must be a cohesive way to come together and

The folks who lived next door at 803 West Cary despised change. They were of the old mold of hillians and refused to accept the imminent doom that was closing in tighter by the day. They worked where they could, picking up a few days roofing, a few days plumbing, a few days scavenging, whatever it took to get by, they did it. They lived for the simple pleasures in life that oh so many take for granted these days. Long afternoon conversations with old friends, late night drinking bouts debating everything under the sun and grand weekend get togethers with bar-b-que and singing. They bothered no one yet were sincerely friendly. This is their story.

From the beginning Bandito's was a bad idea gone real bad. Placing a strictly college geared business in the middle of a poor, working class community is never good for those who belonged to the community an eternity before the invader arrived. This is what happened in the case of Bandito's. The worst possible scenario began to play out almost from its inception in early '97. The bar became a staple of the VCU frat scene. The homes and streets in and around the area became ground zero in the war to save our community. With the rising popularity of the bar, came droves of regulars, date rapes, broken beer bottles in our yards and piss on the back side of our homes. War had been declared and the battle lines drawn.

The 2 a.m. closure of the bar became a nightly confrontation that played out larger then life in the parking lot behind 805 and 803. I t was not uncommon to see a woman screaming and running away from an aggressive jock type not far behind. It was not uncommon to see some poor fool rush to the side of their car and begin vomiting uncontrollably for several minutes. It was not uncommon to shout at, spit at, or throw things at the folks who chose to relieve themselves on the rear of our houses. This all became part of our daily lives and pushed us that much closer to the edge.

Things continued to escalate in the spring months as weather was on the up and the crowds began to surge. Once school let out for the year I knew that something final and decisive would transpire that would probably seal our doom for good. One random day I bumped into Mike Moses out back of the house screaming and carrying on over an event that had taken place the prior evening. Someone most definitely within the confines of the 800 block of Cary Street or the 100 block of Laurel Street went out in a fit of rage that night and sliced tires on an innumerable collection of Bandito's patrons in the lot behind our house. If there was ever any doubt as to the loyalties of the landlord of our homes and Bandito's it all came shining through in true colors that morning. "If this stupid shit doesn't cease then some changes are gonna have to be made." A shallow threat from a shallow man aimed as a reminder that our existence was expendable, but that the loot coming in from the enemy was not. I believe our fate was sealed from the day on.

Less then a few weeks later, Mike had taken it upon himself to have a seven foot tall privacy fence erected around the entire outer perimeter of the rear yard and lot of 803 West Cary. This seemingly basic decision held consequences of mass importance to those it effected most, the residents of 803. You really have to appreciate the nature of their lifestyle to begin to unravel the implications of this decision. They lived in their back lot. They sat out on their patio furniture at all hours. Random friends came to and fro in and out of their yard. They had an unobstructed view of the area that although it wasn't much it was theirs. This was their sanctuary, their haven, their place to melt away into one another and put the daily grind of life on hold and now it had been tainted. As soon as I saw the completion of that eyesore I knew that it wouldn't be long.

Skinny, loud, and explosive, Sara disrupted our lives for a few cold days in mid-February. I met her a month after returning from that three month long journey to the west coast. During this time I was excited about the city of Richmond and 325 house and exploring newfound political convictions partly in relation to the upcoming protests of the IMF and World Bank in DC in April and partly because of things that were happening in the city itself. Plugging into a mass action as one member of a working unit seemed like a good opportunity to learn about direct action, working relationships with people in stressful situations, and personal limits.

Activism is hard work that there is no blueprint for. In the past I have ran away from it, uncertain of how to act on my beliefs. In the months prior to going West I had deliberately stopped any involvement with the activist community in Richmond. Disheartened by the sheer number of potential projects, lack of ability, and the small numbers of the activist community, I decided to focus completely on writing. While going from city to city alone out west I realized that the preceding months had seemed empty. Somewhere in Montana I realized that writing didn't mean shit if I wasn't doing other work to make it have meaning. Going to DC was a good place to start again, a way to act on a large scale and with the support of others. I began reading about the issues, going to the organizing meetings that would eventually form the Richmond Anti-Globalization Network, and attending workshops on direct action tactics.

Sara's interest in activism had been newly revitalized by the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. We talked about politics and writing, but I talked to her with trepidation. I could sense that she and Will had a long and complicated history. Their interactions seemed strained and she and Loren repelled each other like magnets with two north poles.

Before Sara's bus left town she kissed me as we stood in the kitchen. I returned the kiss, still uncertain how I felt about her and the history she shared with my housemates. In the months to come, through emails and phone calls, she would give me the most valuable lesson in persistence that I have ever received.

A few weeks before the day of action, April 16th, the Roadshow for Global Justice passed through town. This motley event attracted more people, 100-150, than I have ever seen present at an activist event in Richmond. Our affinity group swelled to over twenty people, including many that we had never met before. This was a good time for radicals in the city. People's spirits were high, there were a lot of us, and we were working for a common goal.

Unsure of what to expect on the day of action, we trudged into the streets in the early DC morning. Sean had made it to DC days before anyone else, had attended the spokescouncil meetings, and let us in on the strategy. It was simple enough. Downtown DC was divided into a series of "pie slices." Affinity groups would be assigned to certain areas, and working with other groups, block intersections so no one could get to the building where the meetings were taking place.

That morning we fell into a blockade line almost immediately. It was a huge intersection. It took perhaps 150-200 people to stretch across it. It was at the interior of the section demarcated by the spokescouncil, so there were several streets already blocked around us. Police also set up a blockade behind us. A few delegates (the most depraved and absolutely stupid) found their way into this interior region and were turned away. We heard word that the meetings had already started and it didn't take long for the people around me to question what sort of effectiveness we were having. We started heading out.

On the day in early June when the canal walk saw it's grand opening and city dignitaries schmoozing the press over their great accomplishment, a dozen or so Sons of the Confederacy came out of hiding and held a protest on the 14th Street Bridge canal overpass. Behind a giant confederate flag they chanted defamatory comments about El-Amin and pleaded for their glorious Lee to be restored. A couple of hours later, a boat full of the aforementioned dignitaries including Richmond mayor Tim Kaine, former city manager Robert Bobb and former governor Wilder rode under the bridge and protest where Wilder and Bobb decided that they wanted to raise and salute the bigots personally. The image of two of Richmond's so called black leaders paying respect to the Sons of the Confederacy appeared in its full glory in that weeks Richmond Free Press. Wilder declared that Wilder merely serving his patriotic duty to acknowledge all history as equal. El-Amin declared that Wilder was either senile or a damned fool as the now National headline rolled into it's third week.

With the fate of the gallery and a proposed new revised image of Lee in civilian clothes being reviewed by a 19 member committee, the local racists with the backing of Ron Dogget of the National Organization For the Empowerment of European Americans (NO FEAR) brought in their ace card to stir things up even further. Dogget had gained notoriety here in Richmond in years past for his bigoted cable access show, Race and Reality, where he often times lauded David Duke. So it was no surprise when Dogget and company brought Duke, the former grand wizard of the KKK to town to throw his worthless opinions into the mix just days before the decision was to come down on the revised mural. About 15 of us drove up to the Best Western Hotel in Ashland (15 miles from Richmond) to be a vocal and visual presence outside of the speaking. Needless to say there were in the neighborhood of 200 attendees inside to hear Duke that night. I can't say for certain what percentage of our group was hiding their fear that night, but more then likely every one of us played out the scenario of being confronted by the unruly mob in our heads at least once that evening. I remember spotting Dogget at a distance of fifty or so feet away studying us intently as if he was with the FBI. I made sure he knew that I saw him and thought nothing further of it after that moment.

Knowing Richmond and knowing what my city uses as its claim to fame, it came as no surprise to me when the committee decided to replace the controversial banner of Lee with the modified "less imposing" civilian Lee banner. After several more weeks of papers full of editorials and a few lingering debates the city finally put the controversy behind it and attempted to pretend that nothing had ever happened. However the issues of race, reconciliation, history and controversy are things that never fully disappear here in the old south, they just hibernate for a while waiting for the right time and place to sprout up again, and boy did they ever. tick...tick...tick...

When the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday was issued in the early 1980's it was considered a token gesture in remembrance of not only King, but of the plight of hundreds of thousands of blacks the country over who spent decades fighting and laying their lives on the line just to reach some semblance of neutrality in this corrupt country of ours. Now harking back on those tireless fights of the 50's, 60's and 70's we know that the white ruling class elite never had any legitimate intention of offering the black masses much more then a bone to chew on every now and then. Regardless, the MLK holiday is still very much a testament to a powerful icon in the black community who like so many before him was brutally murdered before his time. Here in the capitol city, the official proclamation of the King holiday had to come with a string attached. The holiday was tagged up with that of confederate stalwarts Stonewall Jackson and the mural man himself Robert E. Lee to become in the state of Virginia Lee-Jackson-King day. Year in and year out on the Saturday preceding the holiday our good pals the Sons of the Confederacy came out in full battle regalia to the Lee Monument to guard it from outside invaders for the day.

After the line dispersed we had no real direction. I ambled around for awhile in marches, thinking back to the texts I had read, trying to visualize the effect the protests might have on the workings of our economy, trying to imagine the articles that would appear in newspapers. I saw kids from Richmond that had never appeared at a rally in Richmond taking the time to roam around in the streets of a city two hours away. Were these protests like a big screen version of the revolution and community organizing an underfunded public television program?

The following day in DC was dismal. We awoke early and watched the news for an indication of what we could expect in the center of DC. Half of our sizeable affinity group packed up and left for Richmond. I was almost one of them. We were all scared at the prospect of facing the police with considerably less numbers, no game plan, and a chilling rain.

The ranks were so scattered in downtown that it was hard to figure out where to go. Our affinity group split up into two groups, those willing to risk arrest and those who were not. The group I chose to be in, the low risk group, walked to an intersection where people were practicing civil disobedience. The streets were filled with people watching as the blockers were picked up by police and lifted over a metal blockade. The police seemed almost reverent, lifting the protesters beneath their arms, carefully picking up their legs. There was a hush surrounding the intersection. Even the cops seemed to feel it. It was impossible to tell if the people around me were crying or it was rainwater streaking down their cheeks. Fear turned to awe as we stood there. The cotton of my sweater soaked through. I felt as if I was a child again, watching people as they went up the altar in church, tears streaking their faces, hands raised. I felt almost terrible watching them kneel, wanting to know exactly what part of them had moved, exactly what had happened to make them think the Lord was with them. I was cold as ice sitting in the church pews, felt like I was only half a person because I did not have it in me to make a leap of faith.

We walked to a larger intersection, hoping to find the other members of our affinity group. Ironically enough, it was the same intersection that we were at the day before. Lines of people were locking arms and crossing a negotiated police line together. Hundreds of people would be arrested at that intersection on April 17th. Watching them I felt that curious thing move inside of me, surely similar to the thing that moved my mother, tiny bits of Kleenex still clinging to her cheeks, to throw herself prostrate on the altar. At the time it felt like the right thing to do. It was a strange sort of personal power. I didn't trust it even as it was happening. I felt knocked nearly flat with the enormity of my privilege and the privilege of those around me. Martyrdom and righteousness were thick in the rainy air as we were getting our pockets turned out and being cuffed. A few blocks away the missing Richmonders, including Becky and Will, were getting their heads kicked in by police.

I met JJ in a holding cell after appearing before a judge. We were cuffed around the wrists and ankles. These were bound to our waists. Twenty or so hours later we were fucking in our jail cell and smearing blood on the sheets. Every once in awhile sex feels like a revolution. That was one of those times.

JJ came home with me after we were released. There was a party at 325 the night we got back into town. The activist scene was exuberant. Coming back I was hopeful that activism in our home town would grow to encompass community projects and that we would remain as confident and triumphant as we were in the aftermath of April 16th.

In the following weeks the Richmond Anti-Globalization Network discussed

This year wasn't any year however, it was the first celebration of confederate history since last summer's mural madness. After many years of plotting and planning we pulled together all of our resources and rallied up 30 or so folks to go out and stand tall at the monument on the day in question to keep the pressure on the bad guys and remind them that they lost 134 years earlier. As soon as we arrived the onslaughter began. A cannon aiming appropriately enough north welcomed us, followed shortly by a couple of bearded men with whips and whips on their north upcoming battle. "Lee didn't believe in slavery himself, but instead fought for the state's right to choose its own destiny." The classic opening attack of the opposition proved to us that we weren't dealing with just any old confederates, but indeed we were dealing with well programmed confederates. On with the show. We arrived in droves of four or five at a time until we nearly doubled up on the enemy. After awhile there was enough of us to completely encircle the general and his men and prepare for the offensive. tick...tick...tick...



As we stood along the perimeter of the grass embankment racists of all shades came out of the woodwork. Standing on the eastern corner for an hour or so the handful of us in that region fought off a virtual bombardment of obscenities and bigotry flying out of car windows at forty miles an hour. One fool was screaming and driving while hanging halfway out of his car. It felt as if we were the only sane individuals on the whole planet. I was fazed and let my guard down when a small fleet of the enemy fled their encampment and crept around the western perimeter to confront our southern flank. By the time I arrived over there our team was already holding it's own in the battle. Five or six of the opposition were standing a good ten paces from our solid wall of fifteen slinging their verbal sewage our way. We held our ground firmly and refused to back down. As I stood directly at the end of the line of the two opposing forces all fell silent. The clouds were twirling rapidly in the gray January sky and I could sense a real storm brewing somewhere out there in the distance. Our fight was over for the day but the most powerful force of them all was out there somewhere in our city at that very moment enacting a plot to strike fear into the very heart of the beast, that force would explode into our collective consciousness two days later...tick...tick...tick...

By the time Lee-Jackson-King day officially arrived on Monday most of us were enjoying our off day from work and looking ahead to next year's, stand off. It was late in the evening when the word started to leak out about an act of defiance that would once again bring the ghosts of our past out of their resting place and into our homes. Sometime between the hours of 2am and 5 pm an individual walked up to the floodwall locale of the restored and revised image of the general, stared at it in discontent and then with the flick of a wrist threw a molotov cocktail right on target to incinerate the General much as he and his rebels incinerated the city in 1865. The following day brought the first of several consecutive days of newspaper headlines and newscasts along with the usual chorus of merry men sadppldng to fight that 140 year old battle one more time.

It didn't take long for Robert Barbour, commander of the Virginia Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans to state loudly that "the arson was nothing less than a crime of hate toward Southerners and Confederate history." His ally Henry Kidd went as far as to say that it was "a pure and simple hate crime and should be investigated as such." Richmond police sent the shattered remains of the bottle to a state lab for closer inspection while meticulously examining grainy video footage for any clues as to who the arsonist might be. Although the mainstream news media tried in vain to lead all to believe that the entire city of Richmond was in total opposition to the bombing, the entire city of Richmond was in total opposition to the bombing.

many possible campaigns including targeting Citibank, the Ethyl Corporation, and VCU's encroachment on surrounding neighborhoods. These were all huge issues and it seemed that many people in the group felt uncomfortable taking on such large and well-established opponents. Richmond's activist scene has always been plagued by a lack of skills, unwillingness to speak up, and uncertainty. In the months that followed faces that had been around during DC began to fade and the group abandoned work on Richmond issues to start gearing up for The Republican National Convention in Philadelphia.

JJ and I took walks in Oregon Hill and I tried to figure out what was so goddamned special about him. One sunny afternoon he and I walked through Hollywood Cemetery, a huge graveyard half a block from 325. Looking at the gravestones and hills, the angels perched over graves, I finally understood what it was. JJ seemed to have fallen from the sky. Wonder poured from him. He was deep in that thing called joy. He didn't feel the need to try to create art, wasn't constantly having a battle with impermanence and the passing of time. "Moments are fine just as they are," he said to me. He seemed to have reached an equilibrium and wisdom that most of us never reach and he hadn't yet turned nineteen. I began thinking of him as an angel, as something that would touch my life briefly and profoundly and then disappear. He seemed like the embodiment of good, a concept that I had abandoned years before. Things in this world are neither good or evil, they just are. But here he was, proving me wrong.

In the months that we would eventually spend traveling, I would demean that wonder. Unable to deal with a distilled expression of joy, I tried to dilute it. I constantly reminded him of time and of death. I caused him to think that just living is not enough. I reached up and broke off part of the wings I imagined sprouted from his shoulder blades, tried to pull them apart to find what they were made of.

JJ stayed in Richmond for a week. During that time I was torn between spending time with him before he returned to Austin, Texas and giving Becky the support that she needed after being verbally and physically abused by members of the DC police department. Many nights that JJ was in town all three of us slept side by side in the floor of Becky's room. This contact felt half-assed to both of them and it wore on me. In one short week I managed to almost destroy what remained of my friendship with Becky. My friendship with Loren, already in decline because of all the stresses we had placed on it, for all intents and purposes, ended that week. Realizing that I was falling in love with her I became afraid of getting hurt and stopped communicating with her. She returned the favor. That week we stopped affording each other the simplest of courtesies, like saying hello. Will, dealing with his own issues over being ambushed by the cops, worked on bikes furiously. He and Becky grew close during this time sharing their stories and we had less reason to talk than ever before.

It was the demise of my household relationships that ultimately led me to leave Richmond. The disintegration of these relationships only added to my longstanding depression and feelings of inadequacy, but they were also the product of my sense of worthlessness and powerlessness. I felt like a shell that last few months I spent there, a used up creature who managed to slog to a shitty job a few days a week, ride a bike aimlessly around the city, cook dinner once a week. I didn't know what was happening to me. I had no passion; I felt like I was already dead. I really didn't care what happened to me one way or another. I had memories of contemplating suicide when I was in intermediate school, remembered how easy and comforting those ideas are, how they feel like swallowing your own throat. I read books until the words were smooth and had no meaning, sat in front of a computer screen even though the possibility of writing was non

When asked over the phone by a local writer for the Times Dispatch what the radical community had heard of the incident I told him that he was oversimplifying the issue by immediately calling it someone in the radical community. "You're looking in all the wrong places. This is something that needed to be done, but could've been done by almost anyone in our city." He and the rest of the press trying desperately to uncover a clue that could lead to a story that would break them into the big leagues have never had any idea whatsoever about this city, its complexities and the people that reside here. They've never worked ten and twelve hour days at Labor Ready. They've never fought off frostbite sleeping under a bridge in 10 degree weather and they've most certainly never had to live in a place where around every corner lies a reminder that your entire history and existence is based on a system of human enslavement that saw the genocide of tens of millions of your ancestors. Some folks will never learn.

As time crept by and it became more and more obvious that the cops had nothing, those of us on the underside of Richmond cheered and celebrated our mysterious hero. A year later I reflect back on that glorious event as nothing more than what it was, the roar of a sick and tired population rising up to slay the beast and continue fighting the war that here in Richmond, is never over.

Fall 1999

The six of us moved into the 325 house in the early summer of '99 under rushed circumstances and ill preparation. The collective that had helped shape and define so much of our lives for over three years was on its deathbed. Four of us had just been evicted from our prior house with very little time to effectively discuss and plan our future home and two of us continued to pay double rent at our old homes as we moved into our new one. Although there were six of us for all intent and purpose there were only three. We were six people in three relationships all co-habiting together not only under one roof but also in three bedrooms. Logic would tell you that this is a recipe for disaster and should be avoided at all costs. I can't necessarily argue with this other than to say that logic would also tell you to create the best sum total out of the best individual parts. This is what we set out to do.

By the time we began to lay the framework in establishing Richmond's first anarchist collective household I had already spent countless years and roadtrips across the country coming to my definition of exactly what this meant to me. To me a collective is a group of tight individuals who share a common dream, a common goal. In the context of a household it is a group of individuals who desire to create an environment that flies in the face of societal deemed norm households. A house where its inhabitants work and live together as one, a house where the individuals work closely as a unit with the intent of helping one another reach their maximum potential as both individuals and as a collective whole.

Loren, Will, Kim and myself were all products of the demise of 805. Yvonne and Becky being in relationships with Kim and myself were natural and easy decisions to round out the household. From the get go we were plagued with the three couples syndrome that effected us all in so many ways. Firstly we went into the developmental period of the household having taken part in virtually no discussion whatsoever. I can't speak for others but I really believed that due to the nature of the make up of the house and the character of those in it that somehow our individual goals would naturally evolve into a cohesive, unified force. This faulty logic unraveled rapidly as we unwisely set idly by waiting for our faults to right themselves. If it wasn't for some timely traveling and soul searching I might not be here today with these reflections.

existent. My brain felt like desert soil after a heavy rain has begun to evaporate, the shocked ground separating, each cracked piece its own world. I retreated during this time, feeling like I had nothing to contribute to my roommates, our community, or the rest of the world.

Writing down the details of this seems like writing down parts of a dream. The words seem to have little meaning. They are flat; there is no way to expound on them. I do not feel like I am reclaiming this time by talking about it. I feel like it is an abyss, something that is unrecoverable, something that I should leave alone. My life has been marked with these periods. Each time I am left with the question of "How strong am I?" Am I stronger than the women who are found with their heads in ovens, than men who leap from the high roofs of downtown buildings, who stand on highway overpasses and wait for the right moment?

In the months that followed my heart seemed to shrink up. Some people would call this part truth. Others would call it beauty. Still more call it soul. There have been times in my life when this part of me was large enough to fill my throat. I could have left the earth with it and I would have been happy to.

But that summer I started loosening it wherever I went. I'd walk up the block or pedal the two miles to work without realizing it was gone. It stayed gone for days, sometimes weeks before showing its red self to me, disappearing through trees, pushing over tombstones, hiding under the back steps. It was rarely ever whole those days. I'd find pieces of it in the back yard while turning over soil, glistening in the big gravel on the tracks down by the river.

Those pieces melted in my pocket, they wouldn't stay for some reason. I learned to leave them, to hardly glance at them. I hoped they'd find their way back to the rest of me with new stories to add. Despite that hope I felt it becoming smaller, accepting less. It had less red to reach out with; it pumped less ink, less love.

There is solace in movement, power in knowing you have time to think, something simple and wonderful about picking a destination and then getting to it. I knew I had to get out of Richmond to get myself back together, knew I had to move around before I could enjoy living again. I called JJ in Texas and told him that I wanted to see him again, that I wanted to hit the road after I had made a little bit of money. A few months later, in September, a trucker was picking us up at an on-ramp outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. He had a big beard, mesh cap rammed down over his bushy hair, a gut that hung over his jeans. He reminded me of a trucker who had picked me up a year before, a man named Magnum Payne, who had given me his pager number and offered to teach me how to drive trucks. It's something I get wistful about once I get on the road, driving those damn things for a couple of months and living off of it for the rest of the year. I could get a stack of tapes, a hand held tape recorder instead of a journal, and I could just go, spilling out thousands of tons of toxins, eating up asphalt and rubber, transporting god knows what. And then I start thinking about how much I hate to drive and I realize I could never do it.

He was talkative with us at first and then when he was satisfied we were all right he quieted down some, turning the rock station up loud, peeling away the miles north towards Louisville, Kentucky. The radio was filled with generic rap metal sludge and low quality seventies rock. A good song would emerge every few minutes and my arms would break out into gooseflesh. I was a teenager again and that was alright. I was time traveling and that was alright too. I beat out the rhythm of those songs on my knees, thumped my heavy boot down to strike an imaginary kick drum pedal.

By the end of the summer recent and impending road trips had had the entire future of the house on very unstable ground. Kim was talking as if her departure was imminent, Loren and Will were looking at Providence, Rhode Island as a possible replacement and I was scouring and considering any number of proposed locales as a relief from the frustration that three and a half years of Richmond had brought me. Becky intent to remain in Richmond and push forward was already starting to speak of incorporating new faces into the mix as we as we were a very disheartening time of uncertainty and instability.

As we all departed on our various travel adventures something began to happen. We all began to realize just how inconsistent our thoughts and our principles really were. How in the world were we ever going to challenge the status quo or confront the enemy if we haven't even begun to challenge our own self fears? Gradually as we all arrived back in one place at the same time, we started to do something that as easy as it seems had eluded us by and large up until then, we began to talk. We began to talk of our collective flaws, our individual faults and of our capacity to begin anew then and there. Although the battle that we began to fight still wages on, the days of that first summer together are a distant memory.

Now, more than a year since we made a renewed effort to pull out the microscope and analyze our pitfalls things are better than ever before. The in fighting and bickering and shit talking have dwindled down to a faint glimpse of where we began. We are more of a unit now then we ever have been. We speak often of our goals, our vision and our ability together to reach these seemingly unreachable plateaus. We work together, we play together, we learn together and we are growing together. If it wasn't for the five beautiful people I have lived with my life here in Richmond would be but a faded memory. I love them and thank them dearly for holding me true to not only my

From the beginning we were plagued by poor social skills and an even poorer ability to communicate our frustrations. The fact that we all managed to spend the overwhelming majority of our free time with our respective partners did much to intensify these already glaring problems. In retrospect I can honestly say that I was just as much of a problem with this issue than anyone else. Instead of calling house meetings, we shit talked each other's shortcomings. Instead of confronting each other face to face we posted snide remarks about peoples annoying habits on the bulletin board. These and many other issues flourished in the couple make up of the house where all one had to do was to retreat to their room and bitch endlessly of the matters impacting us all. We nearly self destructed those first six months and managed to only pull together at the very last moment.

Despite our lack of communication I feel safely that I speak on behalf of the house when I say that the importance of establishing our house lies in the desire to build and sustain alternative infrastructure. The desire to build a central nerve center where folks could share skills, talents, resources and conversation in an attempt at reclaiming our lives from the barrage of the consume, conform, mass media culture that is constantly thrown down our throats. This is what we set out to accomplish amongst our peers. Before we could even hope to plant those seeds though we had several of our own to tend after.

It was during an ACDC song that I realized I could lean over and tell him how rock n' roll saved my life if I wanted to. His foot was just as heavy on the kick drum as mine, sounding out one steady beat in the beginning of the song. He reacted not to the lead guitar intro but the low krang krang of Malcolm Young's second guitar. His breath caught in his throat just before Brian Johnson began his customary growling and then he rocked his head forward, hands pounding on the steering wheel. There's something powerful about rock, I thought, as we passed around "For Those About to Rock, We Salute You" like a fifth of whiskey.

And how did rock n' roll save my life anyway? If I scraped the sweat and breath from the walls of my bedroom in my father's house, accumulated over years of dreaming, what would be the weight of it? Could I measure it in desire, exhaust, or stories? Does it have anything to do with love? Was it sharing something sweet or the old desire to get behind the wheel or stick out your thumb to get the fuck out of Dodge. About getting under the skin of god and shedding piss, sweat, and seed, about opening up and seeing past the 7-11 parking lot and the nights with your friends, about saying 'I desire.'

But did rock n' roll save my life?

JJ had never been to New York. For some damn reason I was proud of the city, proud of seeing his face once we got off the commuter train and onto the subway, when we crossed the Manhattan Bridge and he got a half decent look at the city and the East River. Proud like I had some stake in building it, like I was part of it, even though I had barely been there myself.

I grew up with all these ideas about New York. I guess everybody does. It has nothing to do with getting famous or being friends with people who are famous. It has to do with immortality and continuity. I imagined the dirty criss-cross of fire escapes climbing the faces of tenement buildings, the constant sound of voices, music, and horns blowing before I ever got there. I thought about the scum of the sidewalks and the gray streets, thousands of people walking shoulder to shoulder. These were things I could imagine. How could I know about the boardwalk on Coney Island, the stands that sell corn on the cob and homemade candy when you get off the subway, the towering housing projects? Remembering stories I heard as a child, how could I know that it would be in ruins, the strip almost deserted and the Thunderbolt laying in ruins, the Cyclone made of wood, rising up over the ocean. It was when JJ and I got to the highest point on the rollercoaster that I realized I was in love with the city, that it had become a part of me. There is a feeling of limitless possibility there, a rush that lets you know that no matter where you stand, someone has walked there before.

I went to New York at the end of May, a month after returning from DC. A rain storm struck as I was walking to the train. I ran under the awning of a grocery on St. Marks, watching the rain fall fast, rushing into the gutters, the pavement streaked by red brake lights. People ran across the wide intersection, water filling their shoes, they crowded in under the awning and pushed up against me. For just a moment it seemed that everyone was thinking the same thing. I got on the F train that night and rode out to Coney Island. Soaked with rain and standing on the wet sand, the surf pounding but invisible, I felt a little bit of that thing called joy. It was darker, tinged with lightning. It's easier for me to understand it that way.

On my way to New York, at her insistence, I stopped to have lunch at Sara's house in Philadelphia. Chicken bones and trash lay in the streets of her neighborhood. Heat baked trash in the alleys. The cats that lived back there looked starved and mean. I was amazed that the rows of houses were separated not by space but by colors of paint.

Spring 2000

The fallout from Seattle was so severe and so extreme that the ripple effect it created is still causing after shocks well over a year later. It was monumental on every level. It provided a beautiful glimpse into what a world free of domination and hierarchy might be like. It showed what we as a people are capable of when we pool our resources, our knowledge and our compassion. In the six weeks it took me to arrive back in Richmond post WTO the whole country had been virtually transformed. Everywhere you went, everyone you spoke to was aware of what had transpired. Anarchism was a household word for the first time in nearly a century here in the states, and people were looking towards the future with a vigor and drive that I had never witnessed before. It was an exciting time indeed, and Richmond was no exception.

The Richmond Anti-Globalization Network (RAGN) was one of no doubt hundreds of new organizations that sprouted up furiously across the country in the immediate aftermath of the Seattle fallout. Like the countless scores of other groups it was an introductory level course to the principles of anarchism to many a new face. On the streets and in the daily planning sessions in Seattle a decentralized, egalitarian mode of organizing and carrying out our successful mission of shutting down the meetings had the cops and media baffled. It was too much to swallow. No central authority equals a major headache for the bad team. Lots of folks from many walks utilized the spokes council affinity group model with tremendous success that week. The key now was to create organizations throughout the country that modeled themselves upon this formula in their daily organizing in their own communities. RAGN was our local channel to begin to introduce these very principles to the masses here in Richmond.

Things began rather humbly with a ragtag group of ten or so folks coming together on campus from time to time at a video screening, at a discussion and eventually to planning meetings for the formation of a local organization that had as its first and primary goal to mobilize locally for the upcoming IMF/World Bank counter demonstrations in Washington D.C. As the number of public forums and presentations grew locally the group mushroomed to 25 or more at a weekly meeting. Somewhere in the ballpark of seventy five percent of these faces seemingly arrived out of nowhere. Students, professors, artists, aging bohemians and more began to construct the blueprint for the mass street actions in D.C. By the time the big day April the 16th rolled around I hadn't really been involved with the group for quite some time, if every really at all.

The importance of the mass protest movement that is sweeping the shores of the states for the first time in 25 plus years is undeniable to me. There is something immensely powerful about joining tens of thousands of others en masse in a very visual and highly vocal opposition to the instruments of power that corrupt our daily lives. It requires a sustained, highly educated mass of this sort years if not decades to achieve their end goals. But lets be clear about the often times over looked intangibles that are way too frequently lost in the shuffle. Where do the throngs go when these quarterly gatherings are over? What direction is the collective energy unleashed? What exactly are we doing to create the world of tomorrow out of the rubble of today? Where do these folks live and what in the world do they know about the human degradation that occurs daily in the cities they live in and the neighborhoods they dwell in? These are all questions that I've been asking the movement, my peers and mostly myself for the last fifteen months of my life. As of yet I have no definitive answers only more questions.

There was a strange dissonance between us, an attraction that didn't know whether or not it wanted happen. We moved nervously, unsure of how much space to give each other. Our bodies didn't know where to go. I knew I'd have to figure it out soon, I was coming back to Philly in a few days for a rock show.

Live music isn't special to me anymore. It's sad, to think of the way I used to feel when I'd go to see a band play. It didn't matter if I knew who they were or not; I'd still try to give them everything I could in return for time and gas money spent. When I was seventeen I would give the last dollar in my pocket to a stranger. These days I only go to big shows; I go to see bands whose records I already own. They're still strangers, but I wouldn't give them a damn thing.

I was just in time to read the article that Sara had written about Sleater-Kinney for the weekly paper when I arrived in Philadelphia the following week. We talked for a long time about rock music and the boy's voices from our hometowns that we struggled against. Before Sara and I knew one another very well we talked about music to each other like we were still trying to one up those damn punk boys from years before.

I knew that Carrie Brownstein's guitar playing might drive me mad. I had seen Sleater-Kinney play before. Three songs into their set I had forgotten about the teenage girls beside me and the stiff hipsters up in the balcony. I was mesmerized by her movements, a mockery of male guitar rock drama so complete that it stepped outside the confines of our subculture. I got tense watching her play, I could feel the energy between Sara and I change from nervousness to wanting. The power of their music translated the thing that was between our bodies, blew it up into a thousand sparks.

The evolution of our relationship is hard to explain. It feels like the first few chapters of a good novel, the chapters that get written because you can't not write them, because they keep you up at night, because they are the only thing you can think about. Our early days were an exploration of a set of concepts, conversations that spilled into the cracks of the dry and separate plains that I had become and began to join them again. Those concepts have been colored in by pictures of the cityscape, by memories of weather and personal mythologies.

When I think of our first days together I think of South Philadelphia, think of the sun low and bright as I rode west from the Italian market. Music spilled from open windows, kids rode bikes at breakneck speeds, the corner markets were full of talk. On my borrowed three speed I didn't feel like much of anything at all. The part of me that constantly caws self-aware shut up for a moment. I felt my being shift from my body and stretched to cover the entire block. I half closed my eyes against the sun and still felt as if I could see everything.

This is a feeling that sweeps over me whenever I am in Philadelphia. It comes at odd moments, sometimes for only seconds, sometimes for minutes at a time. Once morning Sara and I were awoken by workers across the way singing in Haitian Creole. I sat up in bed and saw their shadows on the ruined wall on the other side of the alley. I closed my eyes and felt the familiar sense of being displaced. I was still conscious of the sheet pooled in my lap, the warm air. It does not hurt to feel your center move. It is almost pleasant. In these moments I could be anyone, the men across the street, a woman turning over vegetables in a market, a young boy pushing his bicycle up the street. As Sara talked about her experiences organizing Haitian immigrants I thought of a phone call from a close friend that I had received years before. It was during her second trip to Italy; she called to tell me about the city of Rome. She talked and talked and finally, dissatisfied with her descriptions, held the phone out her window so I could hear

After a virtual cat and mouse game of taunting an amount of cops that would rival a military in some tiny nations things began to heat up as the rain began to come down. This time we were butted right up against the very metal barricading that yesterday was fifty feet away. All it took was for one person in the crowd of a thousand or so to rub Joe Copper the wrong way and the tear gas began pouring in. A chorus of boos and hisses went up as I could already sense the dramatic nature of our numbers flaring up. Folks at the very rear of the pack were hacking and coughing and carrying on as if they had just been shot by a barrage of snipers with machine guns. It was at this moment that the not so invisible hierarchy of seasoned pacifists began to inform the crowd (via megaphone) that we needed to remain seated so not to create confusion in the event the fascists attacked. With the image of the of hundreds upon hundreds of zombies following every spoken command from their leaders engrained in my head I did what any self respecting person would do at that moment and got up and walked away. The revolutionary Emiliano Zapata once said that it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees, truer words have never been spoken.

I returned to Richmond to the news that literally minutes after I had departed several hundred folks who were gathered at the sight had worked out a "plea" with the fascist enemy to voluntarily cross the designated boundary line into the enemies hands and surrender themselves. This courageous act was preportedly carried out to be in solidarity with their incarcerated allies already on the inside. If one pauses to apply this faulted logic to any major historical event the forces of good have ever waged against our supreme enemy its glaring foolishness shines bright. So with tons of court dates, tons of fines and tons of stories of physical and psychological harm done by the enemy the members of RAGN rolled back into town over the next week and a half victorious from their gallant battle. *Does what do you do for an encore after that?*

As I spent a large portion of my day roaming extensively throughout the "protest pit" I unraveled stories both big and small of the number of arrests suffered, the number of overzealous pigs who were brutalizing random folks and sadly enough one disheartening tale of woe after another. All of this however could have never prepared me for what transpired the following day. With hundreds of folks already imprisoned following the pre-emptive strike and rounds of arrests from the 16th, the remaining highly deflated numbers gathered perhaps more out of spite than any actual hopes of accomplishing anything remotely resembling a victory on the 17th. For countless hours we mobilized at the very intersection RAGN had stood at yesterday waiting to either be pummeled, ignored or...

I was in D.C. for eight full days prior to and during the actions in the city center. I was within eyeshot of the RAGN contingency throughout the entirety of the day of the 16th. They stood side by side of one another in mixed company with dozens of other folks from other regions of the country in a locked arm row of thirty to forty folks across. They were stationed at this locale with the intent of keeping any and all participants of the meetings from being able to enter into the cordoned off area where the meetings were to be held. After several hours of remaining on spot I begin to question the validity of the now wholly symbolic gesture they were engaging in. There was virtually no one kept from entering the blockaded area as all the delegates were whisked in hours before at 5a.m. As if this wasn't enough upwards of 100 fully riot equipped police actually erected a barrier of their own with metal railings and all that was in effect blocking those in the protest line from getting anxious and trying anything themselves. Perhaps I'm an aging pessimist but the mere sight of this signaled the defeat horns loud and clear in my mind, but unfortunately this was but only one in a series of crushing defeats.

the sounds pouring up from the streets. I heard dozens of voices overlapping, the rush of cars. I closed my eyes and thought hard about what she was seeing, so hard that sunlight began to appear in the darkness, the outlines of buildings, mouths moving with the voices. I saw the phone, how the cord stretched, her white hand, but I did not see her. I had become her.

To write about Sara the way I want to I would have to go ahead and write that novel. Trying to write something here feels wrong because it squeezes something huge into the context of something small. I am full of words about the hulking cities of the northeast and ideas about hope, full of details that mean nothing without a hundred pages of words before them. Details that don't mean anything unless you know me, unless you've been to Philadelphia in the summer.

When I think of falling I love I think of going to see a bluegrass band with her just after I got out of jail, crying during the music and not knowing why it was so damn good, finally figuring out that it was because they seemed like they were being honest, that they had a desire to find out where music came from and followed it as far back as they could. Or I think of Sara calling me from a payphone in New York, the sound of traffic almost as loud as her voice. I think of her crying, spitting out, "I don't know what I'm doing with my life. I think I'm wasting my time." It's a theme that follows us, will we be able to accomplish all the things that we want to before we die?

You don't have to live in New York to die a New York death. It happens all the time, the smell of people's old dreams coming from beneath their doors, blowing up and out their chimneys. Dreams have settled all over the mountains where I grew up; they used to choke me in my sleep. It's tragic, to think about lost lives and graveyards, to think about long drives through the country where you see no one but yourself and homesteads, long abandoned, sinking into the high grass. It's tragic because it happens to most of us.

There are few things in life that cause us to feel larger than ourselves, few things that really make us believe that we are not alone. I've spent my whole life figuring out how to become stronger than this need. Sitting with Sara in the sun, air rank with the smells of fish and exhaust, I realized that people pair up so they won't be forgotten, so that when we wake up in the middle of the night with a fever called mortality we can reach out and have something to anchor ourselves to. Each year can be saving ourselves from another demon and starting something beautiful again. But that beauty, once it starts, is something so great and terrible that we can hardly bear it. It's awful, the way life can fill you up sometimes, so much that your veins stretch on for miles and your interior is flooded with visions. The thing she and I were building felt like its only limits were the rest of our lives. It felt like the perfect embodiment of Truth.

She had an idea that the most holy things that we have are our relationships with other people. That these relationships are the closest that we can come to understanding ourselves, that in a godless universe, they are the closest we can get to stepping outside of time. This idea would eventually effect me very deeply, becoming not only a springboard to improve my friendships, but to improve myself. It would

I, as I'm sure many of the current members of RAGN, am prepared to fully and wholly dedicate the remainder of my life fighting to reclaim this world of ours from the clutches of the purveyors of evil and destruction. But when I try and tell Joe Oregon Hill that I'm fighting for him by travelling the countryside far and wide to fight cops and republicans and democrats he can't begin to fathom this. Our neighborhood has seen its housing stock cut to a third of its former capacity, its occupants to a fifth and sits on a small parcel of land that is amongst the most highly desirable in the city. Yet I've spent the past year of my life going to Seattle, San Francisco (for May Day), DC, Philadelphia and Los Angeles and will no doubt be well on my way to Quebec City by the time you're reading this little rant. Meanwhile, historic houses down the street are being ripped up, slumlords are charging elderly residents exorbitant dollars for dwellings they've lived in for decades and the members of my house barely know each other. Yes we've got a world out there to win, but at what sacrifice to the world that exists outside of our windows every night?

Virtually no one knows of the spacial deconcentration that is eliminating the neighborhood of Blackwell off of the map. The fact that the city in cahoots with the high business dollars of the Richmond Centre is waging a devastating war upon the citizens of Jackson Ward has almost definitely never been a topic of conversation at a weekly RAGN meeting. The university that a high number of RAGN members attend, VCU, has gradually chipped away the entire southern face of the nearby Carver community with nary a peep from the anarchists of Richmond. So yeah I'm worried. I'm worried that the extremely high burnout factor of the twenty something mindframe will be staggering when fighting the monster of global capitalism, while we don't even have the capacity to stop the houses in our neighborhood from being demolished.

When you begin to imagine the devastating impact that this event wreaked upon cities across the country you can start to grasp why I'm so bitter. In Richmond there are entire neighborhoods being decimated by urban renewal programs. There are racist organizers the likes of Ron Dogget spewing hatred on local cable access. There are modern day slave labor camps called temp agencies dotting the landscape of every other corner in and around downtown. There are police harassing and arresting the homeless as I write for not having a place to live. And there is nothing but the most elementary beginning of the establishment of any hopeful alternative infrastructure within our beloved radical ranks.

In the weeks after the D.C. debacle I started to sit down with my thoughts and carefully examine the time, energy and resources that went into the mobilization, both here in Richmond and the countless scores of cities much like Richmond across the country. By most accounts there were somewhere in the general vicinity of 10,000 bodies in the streets of DC last April. Using the most rudimentary of math skills one can envision that literally hundreds of thousands of hours of 10,000 individuals lives were highly engaged in the planning, orchestrating and post action clean up of the entire affair. Of these 10,000 faces it's not a stretch to guesstimate that somewhere in the neighborhood of a third of these folks had never before, nor since participated in any action or event of this proportion.



Summer 2000

As we were passing through our first year of existence as a collective household and beginning to confront all of our growing pains in a much more concentrated effort than before we learned of a new household that was coming together. The 1308 house seemed to pop up overnight. All at once several familiar faces were in the hunt for a home and then there it was. Jason, Marc, Elana and Murad all had become staples in the second great flood to swell our community. Jason and I never hit it off. From day one we had a mutual disliking for each other that ran deep. However, in the past few months I have grown to appreciate Jason a significant amount more than I ever have before. In this era of lightness and inconsistency his dedication to see a project through is undeniable. For this I am grateful of his presence.

The other individuals that make up the 1308 house are all interesting individuals in their own right. Elana, Marc and Murad all came onto the scene within six months or so of one another in some form or another through VCU student activism. Marc through unwavering opposition to VCU policies and a never-ending string of various campus based organizations. Elana through becoming a regular at Food Not Bombs and within the ranks of the Lesbian Avengers. And Murad who started appearing a lot during the campaign leading up to the April IMF/World Bank actions in DC where he managed to get arrested twice. Unfortunately for the newly formed collective his unbending stances and inability to adapt to group living caused immediate and severe concerns for the house.

In the first year of 325 we made major strides toward building some long-term community based infrastructure both within the radical subculture we're a part of and our immediate surroundings of Oregon Hill. Our house became a frequent spot for free school classes, discussion groups, our lending library and the revitalization of bikes that became loaners and gifts to those in need. Meanwhile in the neighborhood as a whole we were setting out to dismantle our roles as a threat by being an entirely 20 something non-traditional house full of renters. This is about the least desired household one could hope to draw up for the hill. Needless to say we took what we had to work with and began to become a presence in our new home.

As a house we began the process of cleaning up the exterior of the house and the front yard which had long since been neglected. What seemed like a foot of needles and cones from the pine tree were picked up and some life was put back into the desolate patch of ground that is our front yard. The elderly women on the block took notice as they commented how thankful they were that we cleaned up the awful mess that had built up and gotten rid of the rotten smell of the damp old needles. Meanwhile that summer some of us took turns doing shifts at the neighborhood's Holly Street Playground watching over and playing with kids from area.

Not long after we moved in I became an aid at the William Byrd Community Center (WBCCC) on the next block in the center's library. Some months later Greg Will got hired on as a paid staff member working in the community development board, where he is still employed. As of this writing Loren and Will are orchestrating the development of a community garden through the WBCCC and a professor at VCU who requires his students to do community projects as a percentage of their grade. A combination of all the aforementioned plus actually meeting and getting to know our neighbors has gone a long way in dismantling the pre-conceived notions of our role in the community.

become a way to appreciate the things that are most important in the lives of people I know, whether it's the old anarchist texts Wells reads, my cousin's Jaguar, or the perfect joints my brother-in-law cuts into the wood of the cabinets he makes. I was surprised, turning them over on their sides, corners fitted together so tightly they do not need glue, the smooth planes he sands, does he do it by sight? Are there invisible markings? "I would do this all the time," he says, "if I could. If I had my own land and could make half a living out of farming, I'd make the other half out of this."

Standing in his basement amid table saws, sanders, a lathe and drill press, we talked about crafting, about spending time on a project, creating something that will stagger the mind when you look at it. I told him about the time I spent in Maine, the half hour I spent cutting tiles for a massive mosaic, filling in chinks in the design that had already been laid out over the workspace. As I cut varying shapes and sizes of triangles I thought of many things, but all of those things were related to the rocks in front of me, or more precisely, the lines on which those rocks would be cut. I thought the original idea for the mosaic, the things that were used as models, the stones being mined, sanded, polished, I thought of the finished installation, of someone moving their fingers across the smooth tiles, the rough grout between, marveling at the way the individual pieces fit together, thinking of the representation of time, thinking of all the fingers that have touched it, thinking of me, of a dozen others. But the idea of time extends further than the stones themselves, it becomes the land around me, shapes space, is the medium in which history is created. Suddenly everything I have been and am is pulsing on the invisible line where I will cut the rock. Do real craftspeople become immune to this feeling? Or do they live with it all the time?

I realize I have an aching need to know how to use those saws while I am standing there, boots in sawdust, half worked boards stacked everywhere. I think of how religion comes at the oddest times and in the strangest ways. My mind feels clean imagining the way his hands move across the wood, the same way I used to feel when Will was working on bikes in the room next to the library. Easy to think of machinery and the way that it moves, easy to think of understanding it in a deep way as holy. Why is it so hard for us to understand that god is relative?

But it's not just the saws I want to understand; it's everything. Knowledge is a disease. It is infectious. It spreads like lichen across wet tree trunks. In the stacks of college libraries all across the country I have felt like a hunter, an explorer, seeking keys that will turn the hundreds of locks on my heart. The thing that is hiding inside is truth.

During the time that Sara and I were getting to know each other I began sleeping with someone else. I ran into Jenny at a punk rock show in early June. My attraction to her was immediate and huge. Her body dug into me in ways that nothing ever had before. She was a mystery to me, her gender expression seamlessly combining masculine and feminine attributes. When I touched her I couldn't think of her as a boy or girl, I could only think of the muscles coiled beneath her skin. My desire for her reminded me of the nature of our consciousness, of a great snake swallowing its tail. In the summer I was almost sick with wanting her, Richmond so hot that walking outside your door was like walking into a blast furnace, the waters of the James cool, the thought of her fist in my cunt obliterating everything.

We spent many evenings together, biking through the fan's wide quiet streets, passing by the alleyways. We biked to the West End and fucked hard on the wood of a vast playground. We rode home exhausted and sweating. This is when I was going through one of the worst depressions of my life. There were times when the things our bodies did were the only things that seemed real.

From the beginning she and I were plagued by an unwillingness to communicate with one another. Instead of having conversations we had sex. The awful part about this is that we wanted to be having conversations with each other. We wanted to find out who the other person was, but were scared to try. It would take a week of running around in Philadelphia at the end of July and spending two weeks in jail for us to finally begin relating to one another honestly.

The week before the Republican National Convention was a good one. I had finally made up my mind to leave 325 for good and the idea was strangely liberating. The convergence site was filled with people I had not seen for months, the Richmond affinity group was a large and well organized presence, and the streets of Philadelphia were full of the opportunity to learn. The core of us who had arrived in Philadelphia early grew close in the week before the convention talking about actions we were comfortable taking and whether or not we were willing to be arrested. We had meetings and beers in Ethiopian bars, sat up late on the rooftops of West Philly. We talked about what radical politics meant to us and all the hope we had for the future. I saw strength in my friends that I had rarely seen before and I drew inspiration from it.

All the things that Jenny had never said to me I began to hear her saying to other people. She talked about struggle and what it meant to her. She talked about using her class privilege to help others. She talked in very real ways about her expectations for the action were. Underlying all of this was an obvious love for what she was doing and the people she was with. I could see her confidence in the way she controlled certain situations, in the ways that she interacted with people. A huge respect and desire began to build in me that reached far beyond her body. I wondered what we had been doing with each other all summer long, wondered where all the energy we should have spent getting to one another went. I wanted back the time that we had spent holding each other at arm's length.

Running through the streets of Philadelphia on the day of action I developed a new respect for her. As we pushed dumpsters into the middle of Broad Street, the main north to south thoroughfare, I wondered if I could fall in love with her. As we sprinted east on Cypress I noticed that she was beautiful. The plan for our affinity group, a roving group, was boneheadedly simple. A few of us would tip over dumpsters to temporarily block streets. The rest would move around and create a diversion if necessary. After dumpsters were in place we would create human blockades in key areas. I didn't think the plan would work unless many other groups were doing exactly the same thing. Problem was, that on August 1st, it didn't seem like there were.

We turned left on Juniper, a very narrow side street. We attempted to roll dumpsters north to Chestnut, a street that gets heavy traffic. Cars began to turn down Juniper. The sidewalks were too small to maneuver the heavy blue dumpsters on. Someone tipped a dumpster, probably by accident, into the middle of Juniper Street in front of an SUV. I caught a brief glimpse of the people inside, a man and a woman, and was suddenly sick, a quick flash of the advent of the affordable car and the economic boom it had created in the twenties, GM and the conspiracy for which it was later indicted to replace the system of rail cars with buses, the proliferation of suburbs that occurred after World War II, the disintegration of our cities, the destruction of our farmland, air, and way of life and a whole goddamned culture hooked on the thing that had destroyed it. I was suddenly angry at being a foot soldier for a half assed war, its territory so spread out that there was no way for our numbers to cover it all.

When I first heard of the locale of the newly forming collective house I was stunned. It really is a tough choice between knowingly perpetuating an already devastating situation, such as punks and anarchists moving into a gentrified bombshell the likes of a Jackson Ward or moving into either a yuppified area such as the Fan District or a college wasteland like the nearby Cary Street. There is almost no ideal situation in this or most other urban cities for those of us in the underground community to consciously live that isn't a place completely devoid of any socially redeeming qualities. With this in mind, the newly formed collective chose to settle in on the 1300 block of the aforementioned Cary Street a short stroll from the campus and an even shorter one from the most notorious strip of frat houses in the city. From nearly the beginning we dubbed their abode the Frathouse.

As with the earlier chapters discussing the impact and effect that the Cary Street corridor had on my mental psyche while living at 805 on the northern border of Oregon Hill, I believed this to be a major impairment to the potential for any form of a developmental scheme over at the Frathouse. The overwhelming majority of their neighbors are transients, either of the student or disenfranchised youth mold. Located where they were, on the doorstep of one of the most heavily utilized thoroughfares in the city, with no attachment to anything remotely resembling a neighborhood I felt they had chosen hastily. On our street in the hill people live on their porches. Neighbors watch one another's children and share recipes and see each other daily at the corner store, the neighborhood school, the neighborhood bar or if nothing else at either Pine Street Baptist or St. Andrew's Episcopal on Sunday mornings.

People can trace their family history and heritage back to the 1860's on the hill, sometimes on the same block. Entire extended families live, grow old and die on the hill without so much as ever desiring to go elsewhere. It is a neighborhood and a people of a dying breed. A people who long for the days of yesteryear where the simple things in life were savored and change was a dirty word. Meanwhile the ramshackle houses surrounding the Frathouse serve exactly what their purpose of intent is to warehouse those who are merely stopping by before moving on. Moving on to the world of steel and concrete highrise office buildings a mile down Cary in the business district and the and the far west end suburban super homes five miles down Cary (Huguenot) in the opposite direction.

Thousands upon thousands of students use and abuse Richmond, its neighborhoods and its homes for nothing more than exactly that, a place to prepare for the better tomorrow that undoubtedly awaits them. As I write the five folks who make up the current household at the frat are well aware of the dilemma they created by moving in where they did and are longing for the day when they once again have an option to begin to create something very unfamiliar to the masses of the street they live on, a true sense of belonging.

Fall 2000

Shawn had lived with his brother Corey forever, for years at the corner of Rowland and Cary streets in a highly charged police state area and for the past six months nestled away on a quiet side street in the Randolph community. Their lives had gone in drastically different directions over the years, but it was still unfathomable that they would ever split ways. They knew every single idiosyncrasy of one another and were as well adjusted to each other's imperfections as any two people could hope to be. They were an unshakable unit, or so I thought.

People began getting out of their cars and we started walking away. Several cops ran past my sweaty and red faced frame less than half a block from the scene of the crime and did not bother to stop. I chanced a look around and saw that David and Jeff had gotten singled out. I emerged on Chestnut street and walked by several more cops. Everyone had disappeared except for Becky and Jenny. We walked around the area briskly. Other than a huge mass of people further down on Broad Street there seemed to be no activists at all in the city. Cars easily turned right or left and avoided the blockade on Broad Street all altogether. We talked about the best possible tactic to suggest to our fellow Richmonders when we finally found them. Other than our adrenaline and the police presence, it seemed like any other working day in the city of Philadelphia.

But I didn't know what we were in for. I had expected things to go down much as they had in DC, with a favorable plea bargain that got us out of jail in less than a week. Unfortunately, the city of Philadelphia had no intention of this happening. I think we all began to realize that when, after spending a week in jail, we were split apart and placed on cell blocks with regular inmates. There was a sense of panic when this was announced, a feeling of fading power as we were separated. As our numbers were called and we were led to different parts of the prison, surely most of us began to confront our own racism and stereotypes of the kind of people who are arrested.

My cell-mate was a Muslim woman named Shantel. She was quiet when initially met her in our room, but when I saw her in the yard she was stomping up and down, shouting out loud and cussing. She seemed very happy whenever I saw her, as if life in prison had not affected her too much. Her cheerful good-byes as she left to go to work almost made me believe she was going to a real job and not one that paid \$1.50 a day.

After she put away the picture I said, "Yeah, I am queer."
"What does that mean?"

Towards the end of the summer Kim had decided that she was once and for all gonna make good on her threat to leave Richmond and explore the great unknown until her heart was content and her gray days were gray no more. I dreaded that day would come and even though I always anticipated it, I definitely wasn't prepared when she let us know for sure. We had developed a almost mischievous childhood bond that one would expect out of co-conspiring cousins during a sleepover. I felt hopelessly at ease with Kim discussing and dissecting the mundane intricacies of our daily lives, but more so the lives of all around us. Once when we were staying in a house together on two separate roadtrips that collided we methodically dissected the shortcomings of ever member of the house for hours on in and laughed ourselves to near hysteria, that was Kim and I in a nutshell. I miss her every single day of my life.

At almost the exact moment that Kim was departing us things were in a state of turmoil over at the frathouse. From the get go the folks who made up the collective over there had been at serious odds with the highly opinionated Murad who had cast an ominous shadow over the development of their household since day one. Murad's logic stood that people drinking in the house was directly infringing upon his personal beliefs therefore a direct assault upon his character. I recall one incident with amusement where he protested vehemently over another roommate publicly displaying a placard in a common area of the house that read "Draft beer, not students." Needless to say after countless scores of attempted conversation to find common ground and threats that he had just as much right to remain in the house as the entirety of the collective, (who were opting for his

For whatever reason the first person that both the frathouse and us 32Sers had on our wishlists for our respective roommate replacements was none other than Shawn "I'm perfectly happy where I'm at" O' Hern. If you are living in an environment where your goal is to build and sustain the highest level of personal commitment to one another and the collective you're involved with it is a natural desire to want to have someone who you love, trust and respect amongst you, all of us feel that away towards Shawn.

As time wore on it became clear for the first time ever that Shawn was not only talking about the prospect of moving out, but seriously weighing the choice that he had in front of himself, with all eyes and ears were hinged on his every move. One day in late summer as Shawn was covering a shift at the People's Resource Center the two of us became engaged in heavy dialogue. I was explaining how strange it was that there was such an incredible flood of inspirational people that came into our life seemingly at once in early '98 and how I felt that that occurrence might have been a once in a lifetime sort of thing. The dialogue spilled into his admittance to me that he was all but certain that he was going to move into the frathouse. Citing the ever great challenge of stepping in and aiding the ailing household as his primary rationale, I could and did understand the choice he made.

"It means I sleep with woman."

"I ain't never heard it said like that before. I always heard gay or lesbian or bulldyke. Ain't heard anyone call themselves queer before."

"Are there lot's of lesbians here?" I asked. Shantel laughed before answering. "Honey, that all there is here. You know those two girls who were fighting before we came in here for the count?" I nodded my head. "Well, they're girlfriends and they fight all the fucking time. Lot's of these women beat the shit out of each other when they get mad. But you know some of them don't even think they're women. Some of em want you to call em "he" when you talk about them. Ain't that somethin'?"

I thought of all the women who looked androgynous, uniform baggy blues hiding most of their bodies. Some look like hard butch dykes, pants riding low and boxers showing, shirt sleeves rolled up to show off their arms. And then some of them don't look like women at all because they simply are not. Like the guy who looks like a sixteen year old basketball player, tall and thin, A-shirt, kinky hair, big lips. He's the guy that says, "Jane Doe, you got fire in your sneakers!" when I do something right while playing volleyball. There's another boy who seems smitten with Shantel. When I met him he said "Hi, Jane" with a deep voice and smiled. He had cornrows in his hair and a mustache. His body was slim and hard. I walked in on them embracing and he gave me a shark's grin, as if to say "You know what I'm talking about."

A couple women asked me rudely, "Why do you look so much like a boy?" It's a question that is always hard for me to answer because there is no simple answer. When the question is asked brusquely I usually do not answer it at all.

I began wearing my father's clothes when I started high school. His work shirts and workpants, the heavy flannels, and white cotton T-shirts. I pulled on an old pair of his boots when I worked in the tobacco field. They were too large and my feet slid around in them. Blisters appeared on my heels, but there was something that felt completely natural about that pair of boots. I wore them so much that my father eventually offered to buy me a pair of my own.

Everyone in my family says that I look just like my dad when he was young. When I finally got my hair cut in a bastardized version of the D.A. he wore when he was twenty I felt natural for the first time in my life. Now I get mistaken for a guy almost everywhere I go. But I don't want to pass. I want the whole fucking world to know that not all of us are boys and not all of us are girls.

I have talked to JJ, Sara, and Jenny about these things. When I initially met JJ I called him by his given name and the pronoun she. Over the months he decided that both pronouns were inadequate to describe him but that he preferred he. Jenny exudes boy but her body is unmistakably female. Sara asked me if I thought of myself as a man as we stood on the beach in Asbury Park, New Jersey. I thought about my wide shoulders and short hair, my long nose and blue eyes, my voice. I wanted to tell her about memories that aren't even mine, wanted to let her know that I feel old and I'm tired of trying to make up a word that will succinctly describe who I am. More than anything I wanted to tell her that I'm my father's chance to keep on living, that my gender expression is a product of seeing my father remember his youth through me.

The next day I was moved to a different unit. The women were mothers or grandmothers, in on bench warrants or trying to protect themselves from abusive partners, for using or selling drugs, for shoplifting, for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. It was a shock to see the statistics were true, that most of the people in jail are minority people. Shocked to see from their gestures and brusque ways of speaking

By the time he was done speaking, the nervous lump that had formed in my throat moments earlier had gone away and I was aglow with visions of the future dancing in my head. It was a truly great day that we were setting in an anarchist bookstore in our town of Richmond, Virginia comparing and contrasting the pros and cons of not one but two collective houses that we were apart of, all the while envisioning the ever hopeful day that tomorrow would bring, things couldn't have been much better. Perhaps I spoke too soon...

I had been hearing about Chris Mellon and his antics for months and months from Becky who frequently debated him in her spare time on campus. He was an animal rights activist, straight edge, punk rock boy who loved to strike up an argument any and every where he went. I didn't really think much of him as there are throngs of young, misguided, macho punk rock boys all over the city who come and go with the passing of the season, there was no reason to believe that Chris would be any different.

One night in late January a friend was having folks over for a video showing of an obscure 1970's film called *Born in Flames*. Twenty or so people showed up to watch the film which chronicles the rise to prominence of a women's self-defense biking brigade who combat sexual assault and rape. It was a powerful and thought provoking film that spilled over into dialogue amongst the 75 percent female crowd. A lot of real raw emotions and power began to spill out as the mood in the room became one of solace and frustration over our very real inability to deal with rapists in our communities. By and large the men in the room remained quiet and took very sharp mental notes of the anguish and frustration that was swelling up inside of our female comrades, all of us that is except one.

Early on in the emotionally charged conversation Chris began an annoying habit of disrupting women who were speaking and showing a real lack of respect for the delicate nature of the talk that was going on. When Chris's turn to speak finally did arrive I watched the look on the face of the women in the room go from shock to disgust to disbelief in a matter of about thirty seconds. "If a woman is raped and doesn't inform the police, then she got what she deserved." I wanted to straight up slug him then and there, but there was no need as the women in the room spearheaded by Becky exploded onto him fiercely instantly after those words left his mouth. From that moment on Chris's face was one that would be forever etched in our collective memory.

As the months rolled by I continued to hear of and occasionally see Chris around. On the street, at a social gathering, in the park he continued to make his presence felt whether anyone wanted it or not. Sometime in the spring he began to inform those of us in the anarchist community of his upcoming plans to open up a radical bookstore and community center. Despite the fact that the guy was misogynistic he also tended to give off the portrayal of a loudmouth who could never back up his bold declarations. No one really thought that the space would ever materialize, seemingly out of nowhere it appeared in mid-summer.

that they had most likely grown up poor. Anger and recognition seeped in ways that I did not have a chance to in DC. There was little or nothing our presence was doing, as far as I could see, to help them.

Going to jail was an experience that I do not regret. There is no way that I would have understood how terrible, debilitating, and demeaning the conditions are that over 2 million Americans reside in each day. There is no way to understand hopelessness and aimlessness by reading statistics, no way to understand how real and disgusting racial profiling is without seeing it. Many people who were arrested at the RNC will become prison activists. Too much of what we saw in jail exaggerated the injustices of American life; too much mirrored our worst expectations.

I grew up reading Adrienne Rich, believing that the personal is political and that everything that we do affects everyone else. The latter is a tenuous concept, almost impossible to explain when you get right down to it. I went to DC and Philadelphia with my personal life in ruins and my city being systematically dismantled by planning boards, development programs, and the local university. How did standing on a square of asphalt under the DC sun help, even in the most ephemeral of ways, the people in other countries whose ways of life are being destroyed by a government struggling to pay odious debts? What did my presence in jail do to help the women who are spending part of their lives there?

It is important that a mass action movement, however flawed or misguided, exists in America again. It is important that we examine our doubts and shortcomings and work beyond them. If we succumbed to all of our misgivings nothing would ever happen. Activism is as much about personal growth and strength as it about changing the world.

After I was released in mid August JJ and I started traveling. We got around by hitchhiking, a form of transportation that is at once a way to combat isolation and a contract in trust. Movement had its desired effect. I began to feel like a person again.

After I started traveling my feelings for Jenny became more serious. Through phone calls and emails our relationship had a chance to grow in ways that it never had before. Our interactions and the way we felt about one another began to run deeper and deeper. This led to long talks about the nature of commitment and relationships between Sara and me. Long talks in which we continually ran up against the walls of each other's beliefs and expectations.

Somehow those long talks about non-monogamy turned into long talks about S&M. I began talking to Sara about it after I awoke one late night in Boston to one of the women I was staying with running the sharp tines of a Wharfenburg wheel up and down my arms, across my chest. The sensation was slight at first, barely there. Half asleep I began to arch my body into the sharp metal. As the pain grew it created a rising in my stomach, an excitement that was full, ready to break. I was nervous awaiting it, thinking of standing in the backyard watching the sky grow dark, waiting for the coming rain. The needles broke my skin, peeled it back, and I wanted to be fucked, wanted the skin on my shoulders to be bruised, open, exposed to air.

I began pulling off my shirt and she stopped me, led JJ and me upstairs. In her room she ordered me to take off my shirt. She pushed me face down onto her bed. She rubbed my back first with her hands and then began abrading the skin with a fine toothed silver comb. She ran it over my shoulders, my thighs, my swollen labia. When I began bleeding she brought out a paint brush and brushed me lightly with the soft bristles. When she felt my muscles begin to relax she reached between my legs and grabbed a handful of my pubic hair, pulling it hard. Black dots exploded in front of my eyes and I

I was out of town the entire time leading to and from the opening of The People's Resource Center on the southernmost border of the Carver District on West Broad Street. The place had just magically opened and began presenting a million and one questions from day one. From the get go there was a strong debate brewing in our community about how to deal with this situation. Many folks were of the persuasion that by being around the space, trying to collectivize it, and working with Chris that perhaps we could get to the root of his issues and transform the space into something truly vibrant and beneficial to the masses. At the same time an overwhelming majority of the women in the radical community did not feel safe around Chris and did not want to be associated with him or any of his endeavors. Something had to give, but no one was sure just what that was. It wasn't long thereafter that a good friend of ours came out publicly with an admittance of sexual assault at the hands of Chris, from then on things only took a downward spiral.

Becky almost single handedly began the dialogue of how exactly to handle the situation that we were all now faced with. For the time being, myself and several others kept our shifts at the store and continued to interact with Chris while numerous meetings began to take place to determine what the appropriate course of action should be. The general mood was that the space was much more a reflection of those of us who had put it out there than it was a strong foundation in Richmond that of some macho assaulting prick who had sprouted up out of nowhere in the past year to at this point totally and utterly fuck up lots of people's lives in a major way. We were determined to hold him fully accountable for his actions, force him to leave the space and transform it out of the wreckage of the old and into the new.

While I was away on a trip to Philadelphia a much grimmer story began to unfold around Chris and the damage that he had heaped on so many. I was told of and put in contact with not one but two women from Philly who also had run afoul of Chris and his dark past. Both women told stories of manipulation, aggressiveness, sexual assault and rape in their past dealings with Chris. A few days later one of the women found herself amongst a travelling group of four visitors who stayed at our house with the intent of letting all in the radical ranks in Richmond know of her history with Chris.

Over the course of the next week she told her very sorrow filled story more times to more people than any woman who had never met prior to that week spent countless hours together pouring their hearts out to one another and began to try and figure out some form of closure for themselves and some sort of way to ensure that this never happens again, and that Chris take full accountability for his unspeakable acts. Those of us who had foolishly remained to the last minute pulled out everything that we had invested in the space the next day.

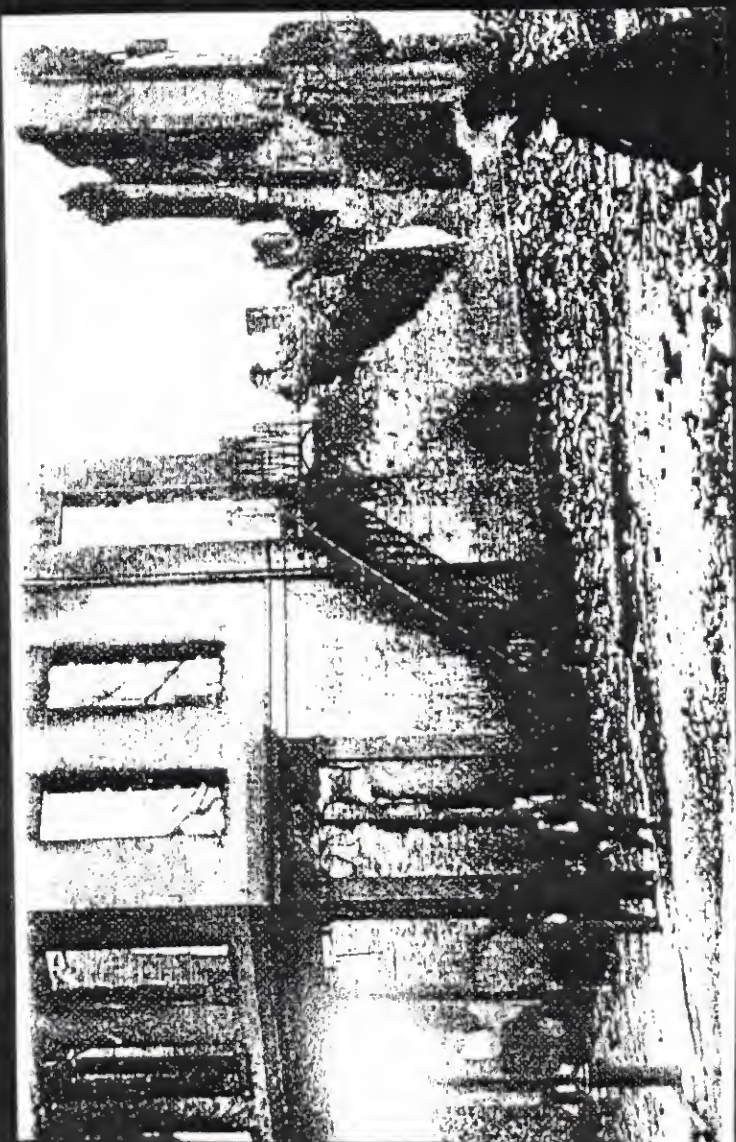
A few days later Chris and the band were in Philadelphia for a show. Before going up he agreed to take part in a mediated discussion between himself and the three separate women who had outed him at a local radical community center. During the discussion Chris consented to meeting a series of demands that included STD testing, counseling and the full removal of himself from living in and operating the People's Resource Center. By the time Chris was confronted and kept from playing a show at a local venue in Philly he had already drafted a 48 point manifesto of contention that he proceeded to read aloud in front of a raging mass of folks who were growing more impatient by the minute. Needless to say by the time, he left Philly that night he had no intention whatsoever of complying with any of the demands that he had agreed to in good faith only hours earlier.

screamed, the pain was so great. She pushed my arched body flat again when I made the noise, laughing. I was swimming, hardly present when she draped the soft leather of her flogger on my back and let it rest there.

Instead of filling me up the pain had made my insides larger. My chest felt as wide as an expressway, filled with white pines and darkness. She leaned close and whispered in my ear; I nodded to let her know it was all right. She started off easy with me, hardly hitting, trailing the leather along my back so I could feel its softness. As the blows increased in intensity my brain began to flicker. Each time she hit me new stripes formed on my back. I thought of everything and nothing at once. I was leaving the earth.

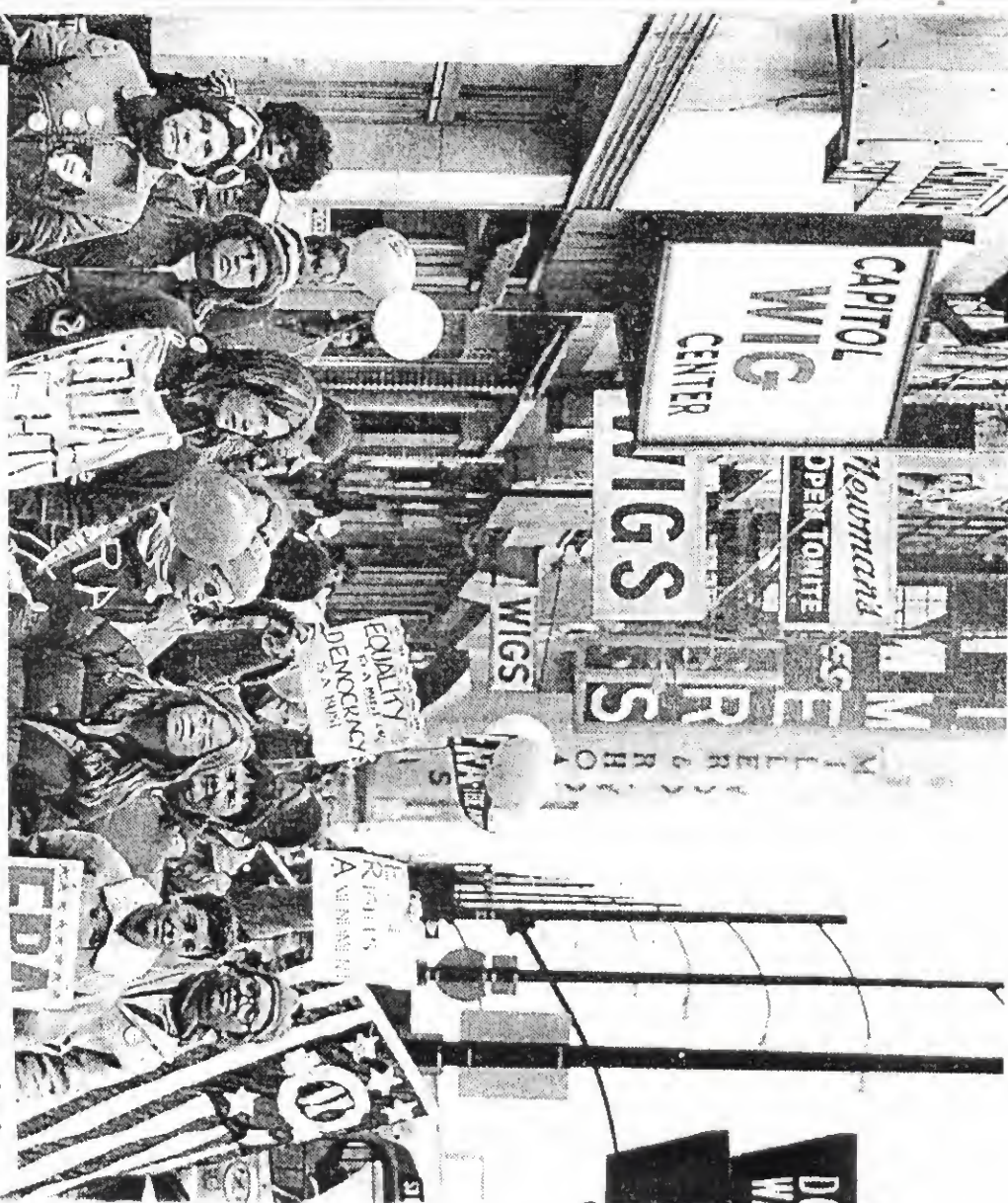
After the session was over, we went downstairs and had breakfast with the sun beginning to stream in the windows. I thought about the new space in me that had been created, wondered what it meant, what I could do with it. I called Sara that night and asked her questions about her desire to be bound, at the same time trying to figure out why I liked to be hurt. Sara talks about these things in terms of tenderness. When she hurts me the space in my chest grows even larger. The thing that it is filling with is trust. When I fell in love with her I realized I would let her do anything she wanted to me.

Over the months that JJ and I have spent traveling our interactions have grown increasingly violent. He chokes me until my throat is bloody and raw, puts his big boot on my chest, ties me up and leaves me waiting in the dark, blindfolded and gagged. I've punched him in the chest and in the nose, surprised at the dark black of his blood in the moonlight. He talks about putting his big hunting knife to my throat and forcing me to suck his cock. I want to rape him. These desires are huge and unexplainable. No matter



As I write today some two months since the very unofficial ending of this ordeal absolutely nothing has been solved. Many an uneducated person have flocked to Chris's aid citing how he was victimized and how nothing is conclusive anyhow, seeing how Chris hasn't been convicted in a court of law. Due to the sensitive nature of the local woman's fears no serious actions have been carried out against Chris who is more of a public figure now than he ever was prior to this. The PRC is still open and Chris still lives there where many women walk in and out of the storefront every day completely unaware of who he is and his past.

As for us, the anarchists, all the past few months trouble has indicated very clearly to me at least that there are gaping holes in our logic. We really and truly have no formal or productive way of dealing with major internal conflicts the likes of a rapist in our community. Sure it wouldn't take much creativity to trash the PRC nightly or jump Chris when he's out alone, but realistically what good would any of that accomplish? We need to begin to create a serious dialogue amongst ourselves about just how we plan on not waiting for the revolution to fall out the sky to create the revolution that is our everyday lives. Until that day we will be anarchists in name only. the end.



how closely we trace backwards we cannot figure where they started. They seem to have always been there, fitting with the rest of our beings seamlessly as blood pressure, as the speed of our pulse. They are just as dark and powerful.

Being with JJ has made me realize that sex really can transcend the realm of bodies and become something else. It is a palpable force that exists between us. Its pull has dragged us across the country together. I think of dark pines and the roar of the interstate when I'm being beaten because we fucked in the cold in Maine, because we stood on a bridge in Bangor for hours waving our thumbs, because we slept side by side on interstate 95. Because Vermont in the early fall is the most gorgeous thing that I've ever seen, because we walked across back roads and black top and it was beautiful, because rivers cut through this country still, because we rolled over mountains. I think about it because life is sweet right now, life is so sweet.

I have an almost superstitious belief that if I unravel the source and impetus of these desires I will understand a large part of what lies at the core of me. Across the country I have asked people questions about their desires and have discovered that they are as much a mystery to most people as they are to me.

It's hard to talk about power because no one knows where it comes from. To talk about sex in terms of inflated or exaggerated power dynamics is hard. Most people I talk to (myself included) feel that there must be a justification of the distortion of power between two people more than, say, a penchant for a certain color of hair. There must be a justification for things as outlandish as enjoying being beaten, choked, cut, tied up, humiliated, and pissed on. There must be reason for desiring to do these things to other people.

I asked myself these questions first. I wound backwards and found myself leaping from the rope swing my cousin had tied up in a beechnut tree when I was ten or eleven and landing on my knees in my our grandmother's backyard. He jumped on my back and pushed me back into the grass as I was getting up, smearing green across my palms and knees. I knew there was no way I could get him off of me, but I struggled anyway, feeling his muscles tense against me. Years before that are horror movies, Dracula, fear of being alone, fantasies of being raped, and whippings with smooth thin tree branches. Are these the things that cause me to desire a knife to my throat, a collar tightening against my windpipe?

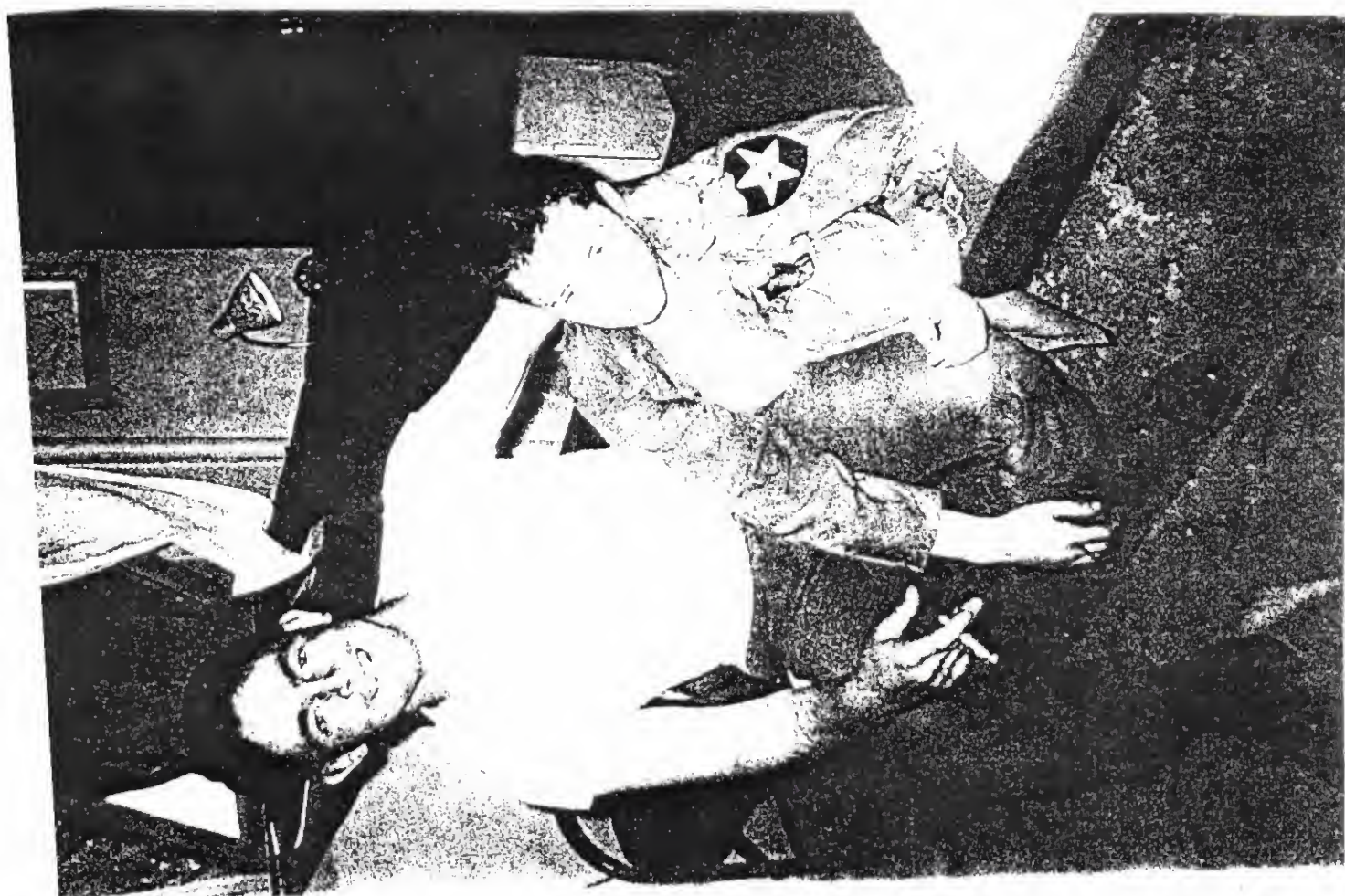
All of these details leave me with no real reasons. I can see the pictures but not what lies behind them. I am dumbfounded by the slippery nature of our consciousness, sure that if we contemplated it long enough we would lose our grip on it completely.

Richmond moves slow. It's an old southern town full of ghosts. The hidden mouth of railroad tunnel under Church Hill that collapsed. Yvonne and I uncovered it one day, close to Sugar Bottom, the woods scattered with the bright plastic of broken toys and old rags of clothes. The boards and bricks of demolished houses, the hundreds of faces that lined the streets of downtown on weekdays before developers jumped in pushed around the land on the outskirts of the city and those who could afford to move out of the city did. Confederate soldiers and white money, slavery and plantations. I learned my first few lessons about race relationships in Richmond, suddenly transplanted from a small town where no people of color lived, to a city where sixty percent of the population is black. I am still learning these lessons; I will be until I die. Occasionally some of these ghosts flair up. Last year a mural of Robert E. Lee was torched and half the city celebrated.

When Johnny appears before the judge he says, "But it was more 'n all this that put that gun in my hand." He's talking about the auto plant that closed down, the house payment he can't afford to pay anymore, the awful Jersey skyline. He's talking about his wife, his kids, the rest of his life. He's talking about everything that was pressing down on him until that moment when he up and blew his top. I think of the things I would and would not do sometimes. I think of the undiscovered country of myself, the things I have been and will be. Part of this country is dark, it stretches far beneath me, marked by caverns filling with lakes, subterranean hills, forests of moss and dark pines. It is too huge to grip, like digging in dry earth thinking you have uncovered the edge of something delicate and small, only to discover that the more you dig the larger the object becomes. It is never ending; there are pieces of it protruding from the land surrounding my father's house, the soupy backyard of my grandmother, scattered like bones along Route 5 in Vermont, the Mississippi Delta, being ground into sand by the ocean along the coast of Maine. The terra firma of me is boundless, as large as the tectonic plates shifting beneath the earth. The thing that is easy to forget is that everyone's life is just as large, just as full of deep wells and volcanoes. How many people do we take the time to dig at, feel the designs etched into their clay, the texts stacked in their memory? We will never be able to know everything.

The question is what we choose to be our salvation. I grew up feeling desperate and desperation is what fuels me still. My daddy was gorgeous in a mean way when he was young, white T-shirt and jeans, black boots and greasy hair. I have a picture of him holding a copy of "Orange Blossom Special" in one hand, arm slung around a buddy's neck with a bottle of whiskey in the other. Johnny Cash is sitting on top of a boxcar on the cover of that record, looking out in the distance. Blue sky is flying by. One boot is hanging over the edge of the train. I know my dad wanted to be on the cover of that record. He's been waiting for something to save him for fifty years now. When we was young he tried to fuck his way to eternity. And there was car racing and late nights with boys. There was running from the law and begging for deliverance, crawling home and asking his preacher dad for money. There was my mother, one day coming up the driveway in her brother's mustang and holding her belly, saying, "We got to get married." There was my sister and there was me. Almost forty years of being a drunk and he still hollers about God having a special plan for him because he thinks he ought to be dead.

It doesn't matter that our lives don't matter, but it's hard to remember that. I always need something to remind me. I need something to keep the meaningless at arm's length. It might be New Orleans or it might be falling in love. But it's really about not dying before I'm put into the ground.



There was a party my last night in town. I wandered through it feeling half dead. I felt bruised over leaving, full of regret over ruined friendships. The bruised feeling was so strong that every conversation left imprints on me. I cried salty tears talking to Will about the early days of his relationship with Sara. We talked for a long time and when I said goodnight to him I wondered again why we had never gotten to know each other.

When I talked to Loren I felt like an exposed nerve; I couldn't stop crying. She has left smudges on my memory, soft charcoal streaks the consistency of ash. When I was a kid I used to watch my mom and dad empty the bottom of the woodstove, the part that caught all of the ashes from the burned wood. They dumped it at the edge of the backyard, sometimes onto snow, sometimes onto mud. They put on big brown work gloves to do it. When dad cleaned up the yard after winter was over, he piled everything up over the space where they had dumped the ashes all winter and then lit it up. He'd find aerosol cans from around the house and let me throw them into the fire. I'd toss them over my shoulder and then run. Dad ran with me, holding onto his belt to keep his

jeans from sliding any lower. The explosions were loud and produced large oily clouds of black smoke. The ashes in early spring I always thought about mixing with water, painting the trunks of trees, my white cheeks, pieces of black construction paper. Somehow I never got around to it. By April they had melted back into green grass. I apologized to her for letting those things run into the earth.

The ceiling of the front porch of 325 house looks like the hull of a canoe, long ago painted turquoise and pushed out to sea. Now in some places the color has worn all the way to the wood; the rest remains blue-green. In the daylight its angles are full of shadows. At night with the porchlight shining it appears almost luminous. Yvonne took me out to the porch wrapped in a blanket to say goodbye.

Looking up at the battered blue of the ceiling I remembered a bike ride we had taken in the summer that wound through the state named streets in Randolph near Texas Beach. What had happened that night? Was it a weekend; were we lonely? Was it about to rain, thunderheads flickering purple and yellow above the clouds, the heat of the day absorbed into the crooked bricks of the sidewalks, the dark blue asphalt. She talked at length about marine life, about parts of the planet we will never be able to explore, animals we cannot imagine.

I was thinking about Yvonne when I stuck my head into the furnace in the pauper's graveyard in New Orleans. I studied the charred brick walls, contemplated stretching my body out in the narrow box. There were crude drawings on the walls. I wanted to bring her something back from the boneyard, a plastic flower, a piece of wood, anything, to say to her that even though we are surrounded by death I know I am alive and I am continually thankful for it.

And now, sitting in the public library with snot streaming out of my nose, bruised by memories, I'm thinking about you Yvonne, marine life settling far beneath the passing hulls of fading boats, and I know that it's sad, all the secret places of people we never touch.

After everyone left the party I put Bruce Springsteen's 1982 album "Nebraska" on the turntable and stood by the speakers, half drunk, crying. "Nebraska" is full of characters who did the wrong thing, full of people who don't know any way to live their lives other than how they are. In the live version of Johnny 99 you can hear Springsteen taking ragged breaths between the lines of each verse, like he's running from the cops himself, like Johnny ain't just some hard luck story he made up, like there was a point in his life when he could have been caught waving a gun around at some poor clerk in New Jersey before the cops came to take him in, and then rock n' roll came along and saved him.

Of course nothing comes along to save us. We save ourselves. We find ways to save ourselves or we die in hundreds of horrible ways before we are ever committed to the earth. We die in ways that are astounding. We die quietly. We die as friends and loved ones watch us. We die alone. The darkness that lies at the core of us is constantly threatening to leak out, to poison the air. Our disease spreads to others if we are not careful.

